

## WAR AS A RHETORICAL MODEL: mythical memory, lexicon of order and argumentative inversion Them x Us in the political discourse of the Brazilian far right

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- **ABSTRACT:** In this text, we aim to investigate the rhetorical model of the political discourse of the Brazilian far right today. We are particularly interested in the relationship between mythical memory (Pêcheux, 2007), argumentation and violence (Perelman; Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2014; Amossy, 2017). To this end, we conducted a qualitative and quantitative lexical analysis of 922 statements made by Congressman Jair Bolsonaro in the Chamber of Deputies between 2000 and 2018. That said, in the first section, we discussed the relationship between the sacred and violence in the constitution of cultures, especially with regard to the moral organization of the world and the senses of order. In the second, we conducted a historical analysis of the relationship between war and the legitimization of violence in the West. In the third and final section, we address the argumentative-discursive problems of our research, describe our qualitative-quantitative method of assembling the corpus, and, finally, perform the lexical analyses. As conclusions, we propose the fusion of ultraconservative military and fundamentalist religious discourses in the organization of the political discourse of the current Brazilian far right, the relationship between the rhetoric of war and mythical memory and the inverted argumentative formula Them vs. Us.
- **KEYWORDS:** Rhetoric of war; Mythical memory; Qualitative-quantitative lexical analysis; Them vs. Us; Brazilian Far right.

### Opening remarks

On July 5th, 2022, a few months before the national elections, former President Jair Bolsonaro asked: *“how does one win an election, fucked up like me, despised inside the House of Representatives, screwed over, made fun of, a lousy deputy, a lousy deputy.*

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*I can never understand it, right? How some do not understand what is happening.”*<sup>1</sup> (UOL, 2024). In his own way, the Head of the Brazilian Executive Branch at the time formulated somewhat lucidly one of the main problems faced by scholars of the Brazilian political discourse in contemporary times: how did the Brazilian far right manage to come to power in 2018?

Unlike Vargas' *Estado Novo* (“The New State”, the third period of the Brazilian Republic, from 1937 to 1945), and the Military Dictatorship (1964-1985), both established via institutional ruptures, Bolsonaro, like the European totalitarian leaders of the 1930s and 1940s, used the word (*logos*) to conquer power. He managed to legitimize before his audience the need to use violence to resolve the country's internal social contradictions and succeed in the ideological struggle for power. Such a phenomenon cannot be explained solely by accusations of ignorance or irrationality.

Understanding the dynamics of authoritarian thinking is the best way to fight it. In this sense, it is necessary to investigate how this worldview is organized, analyzing epistemic, ethical and aesthetic aspects. Through this approach, we can better understand how Jair Bolsonaro became President of the Republic in 2018, with a significant 57,797,847 votes, and how, four years later, in 2022, he showed it had not been by chance, as he increased his number of voters to 58,206,354 votes (Cerqueira, 2022). As of June 2024, the politician can still be considered the key figure not only of the far right, but also of the national political right (*Veja*, 2024). Therefore, answering the question posed by Bolsonaro himself is not an easy task.

Contrary to the respect for the orator's classical virtues in the Greek *polis*, the affront to democratic rules in Brazil today seems to have been precisely one of the main catalysts of Bolsonaro's political ethos. He stood out for acting as an “engineer of chaos” (Empoli, 2019), for using chaos as an argumentative method (Nobre, 2020) and for promoting anti-politics as a political strategy (Avritzer, 2020).

The challenge, then, is to describe the discursive memories in which Bolsonarism is inscribed in order to produce a grammar of intolerance in contemporary Brazil. In line with Nunes (2022, p. 24, our translation), “talking about ‘grammar’ does not mean to remain only at the level of language. A grammar, in Wittgenstein's terms, is part of a way of life.” Furthermore, the philosopher adds, “[...] if the way in which one lives conditions what can be said about the world, what can be said about the world also provides the basis for decisions and institutions that condition the way in which one lives.”<sup>2</sup>

Following Pêcheux (2007, p. 49-50, our translation, emphasis added), “memory should be understood here not in the psychologistic sense of ‘individual memory’,

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<sup>1</sup> Original excerpt: “como é que ganha uma eleição, fodido como eu, escrotizado dentro da Câmara, sacaneado, gozado, uma porra do deputado, uma porra do deputado. Eu não consigo entender, né? Como alguns não entendem o que está acontecendo” (UOL, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Original excerpts: “falar em ‘gramática’ não significa permanecer somente no nível da linguagem. Uma gramática, nos termos de Wittgenstein, é parte de uma forma de vida”. “[S]e o modo pelo qual se vive condiciona o que se pode dizer sobre o mundo, aquilo que se pode dizer sobre o mundo também fornece a base para decisões e instituições que condicionam a forma pela qual se vive”.

but in the intersections of *mythical memory*, social memory inscribed in practices, and the constructed memory of the historian,” so that the study of collective memory renders it possible for the discourse analyst to investigate the “conditions (mechanisms, processes...) under which a historical event (a discontinuous and external historical element) can come to inscribe itself in the internal continuity, in the potential space of coherence specific to a memory.”<sup>3</sup>

Methodologically, Foucault (1981, p. 68) proposes that the discourse analyst’s challenge is “[...] to establish diverse series, intertwined and often divergent but not autonomous, which enable us to circumscribe the ‘place’ or the event, the margins of its chance variability, and the conditions of its appearance.” More recently, Vitale (2016, p. 169, our translation) argued that “the types of argument codified by the New Rhetoric constitute useful tools to investigate the ways in which historicity penetrates persuasion.”<sup>4</sup> Based on this, the Argentine researcher proposes the intersection between Discourse Analysis and the New Rhetoric to suggest the category of rhetorical-argumentative memory, which would allow us to evaluate the statements that continue to be repeated by different subjects over time, provided that they are inscribed in this symbolic place and assume their social expectations.

The hypothesis we defend in this text is that Bolsonarism, as a contemporary expression of the Brazilian far right, becomes possible as a political project of power when it manages, as of 2011, to interdiscursively condense two mythical memories: that of the sacred and that of war. In that year, what we have called the “moral turnaround” of the Brazilian far right took place (Cf. Morais; Moita Lopes, 2024). The explanatory challenge regarding our object of analysis is to demonstrate how and when religious fundamentalism and militarism came to intersect in this discourse. To this end, we performed a qualitative and quantitative lexical analysis of 922 pronouncements by Jair Bolsonaro in the Chamber of Deputies from 2000 to 2018, when he still exercised the parliamentary role.

Bearing this in mind, this text was structured as follows: first, we will discuss the relationship between the sacred and violence in the foundation and organization of human societies. Second, we will reflect on the relationship between war and politics in the Western tradition. In the third and final part, we will develop an analysis of 20 (twenty) keywords present in Jair Bolsonaro’s political discourse, 10 (ten) associated with the ultra-conservative military discourse and 10 (ten) associated with the fundamentalist Christian discourse, to assess the relationship between politics, war and religion in this ideological field nowadays.

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<sup>3</sup> Original excerpts: “[m]emória deve ser entendida aqui não no sentido psicologista da ‘memória individual’, mas nos entrecruzados da memória mítica, da memória social inscrita em práticas, e da memória construída do historiador”. “condições (mecanismos, processos...) nas quais um acontecimento histórico (um elemento histórico descontinuo e exterior) é suscetível de vir a se inscrever na continuidade interna, no espaço potencial de coerência próprio a uma memória” (Pêcheux (2007, p. 49-50).

<sup>4</sup> Original excerpt: “os tipos de argumento codificados pela Nova Retórica se apresentam como ferramentas úteis para indagar os modos pelos quais a historicidade penetra a persuasão”.

## The sacred and violence in the organization of human societies

To explain the problem of human violence, it is common to find both epistemic and doxic perspectives that associate it with the nature of our species. In this sense, violence would function as a kind of curse, moving between biological and mythical destiny. This “immovable engine” of human nature would ultimately explain the frequent repetition of phenomena such as wars, tyrannies, dictatorships, authoritarianism and totalitarian movements, removing their historicity and their operation in internal and external social disputes for power.

In *On Violence*, the German philosopher Hannah Arendt (1970, p. 75) states: “Nothing, in my opinion, could be theoretically more dangerous than the tradition of organic thought in political matters by which power and violence are interpreted in biological terms.” It is curious, according to the theorist, that the phenomenon of violence is naturalized by analogy with the sexual and nutritional instincts, since, contradictorily, it forms a correlation between the tendential “disappearance” of violence in the management of human relations and its growing role in accumulating aggressiveness. “[...] unlike these instincts, which are activated by compelling bodily needs on one side, by outside stimulants on the other, aggressive instincts in the animal kingdom seem to be independent of such provocation,” Arendt criticizes (1970, p. 61). It would, therefore, be as if “the *sensation* of hunger in man would increase with the decrease of hungry people” (Arendt, 1970, p. 61, emphasis by the author).

In parallel, such studies tend to erase precisely the behaviors that contradict their premises, such as the “generosity” of wolves in not killing the defeated enemy. With regard to the legitimate use of violence, the philosopher points out that “*legitimacy*, when challenged, bases itself on an appeal to the past, while *justification* relates to an end that lies in the future” (Arendt, 1970, p. 52, emphasis added).

Still in her words, violence can be considered an essentially instrumental phenomenon, obtaining its rationality insofar as it seeks to achieve the end that must justify it. This raises the problem of defining what moral grounds would legitimize and justify the use of violence. In this regard, Arendt (1970, p. 52, emphasis added) complements: “Violence can be *justifiable*, but it never will be *legitimate*. Its justification loses in plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future.” Thus, ultimately, violence would only make sense when it was an immediate reaction, precise in measure and stemming from the urgent need for self-defense. In this way, it would lose its reason for existence if it transformed into a strategy *erga omnes*, that is, against all, by which it would become a will to power to remain without resistance (Arendt, 1970).

For Durkheim (1974), morality emerges when the bond between an individual and a group begins, that is, when individuals start to subordinate themselves to social duties. These rules aim primarily to maintain the cohesion, durability, and life of social beings. In one expression, morality would function as “inner exteriority”. It would thus be a transcendence inscribed in individual bodies through the process of socialization, organizing the very sensitive nature of these bodies.

Such bonds are mediated by the emergence of the very idea of collectivity and the sacralization of some norms. According to the sociologist, the sacred refers to what is set apart, separated. In his words, “what characterizes it is that it cannot, without losing its nature, be mixed with the profane. Any mixture, or even contact, *profanes* it, that is to say, destroys its essential attributes” (Durkheim, 1974, p. 70, emphasis by the author).

Thus, the sacred is opposed to the instrumental rationality sometimes associated with political practice. “The public conscience does not admit, and has never admitted, that one would be *justified* in failing in one’s *duty* for *purely utilitarian reasons*,” asserts Durkheim (1974, p. 71, emphasis added). “If it is forced to tolerate such behavior, it seeks, by means of some casuistry, to hide the contradiction from itself” (Durkheim, 1974, p. 71). In this case, how can we explain violence that claims to be sacred, that legitimizes and justifies itself in its name, shifting from instrumental to transcendent, from an immediate end to the perennial maintenance of social order? The answer may bring together Arendt’s (1970) reasoning on violence and Durkheim’s (1974) on the sacred, giving it social concreteness.

For Girard (1987), Durkheim ended up performing a rigid division between sacred and profane, since the former would have no clear limits. For the anthropologist, the sacred refers to the “sum of human assumptions resulting from collective transferences focused on a reconciliatory victim at the conclusion of a mimetic crisis” (Girard, 1987, p. 42), which is related to the conflict for the same “object”, for example, social and political power.

In this sense, the sacred would be linked to the ritual of collective lynching against the scapegoat and to the ritual of sacrifice, working as a sort of violence that founds the very idea of community. Sacred violence, therefore, directs the endogenous toward the purging of the exogenous. By these means, it establishes the bonds by which the community is affectively organized. In other words, the sacred is linked to expiatory violence that allows the suppression of internal conflicts that may put the collectivity at risk.

“The hypothesis of the sacred reflects the human mind in its recognition that it is surpassed and transcended by a force that appears to be exterior to it,” ponders Girard (1987, p. 42-43), “since at any moment this force seems to exert its will on the entire community for reasons which, though they seem ultimately incomprehensible, seem nonetheless to be beneficent rather than malevolent.” The violence committed from this symbolic place would be on the side of good, which is understood as a force majeure, a category considered superior to all beings and social groups. For this reason, it works at least partially as an imperative, as a must be.

Also based on the explanatory hypothesis of the sacred, Williams (2021) analyzes how the opposition between outgroup and ingroup underlies the worldview of human societies and the alignment of groups around arguments, values and emotions. In particular, the author approaches the argumentative structure Us x Them. “Throughout human history, group threats represent the main source of conflict – competing tribes, armies, and nations battling it out for the top spot,” writes Williams (2021, p. 137).

In his view, there are five stages that are related, on the one hand, to the affirmation of Us, and, on the other, to the denial, distancing and antipathy towards Them<sup>5</sup>. The first of these stages is *antilocution*, characterized by the occurrence of jokes and insults. The second is *avoidance*, which ranges from “organic avoidance” of contact to segregation in public spaces. The third is *discrimination*, associated with denial of access to opportunities, goods and services. The fourth is actual *physical attack*, the physical aggression itself. Finally, the fifth is *extermination*, at which time deadly violence against the outgroup becomes desirable, as in the cases of the Holocaust and different genocides (Williams, 2021, p. 30-31).

For Williams (2021, p. 273, emphasis by the author), the inclusion of individuals in hate groups establishes a kind of “warrior psychology”, which, in his words, may be defined as “the theory that extreme levels of bonding to a group – a form of *identity fusion* where the individual and group become one – can lead to the types of unfathomable self-sacrifice.” Williams adds (2021, p. 273): “the fusion is so extreme that individual and group believe they share ‘essence’, where one cannot imagine existing without the other: total devotion.”

This process stems from the ritualization of collective traumatic experiences through painful rites of passage at the individual level. Group members rationalize the reasons for accepting group challenges and create bonds of trust strong enough for them to enter a stage of cognitive dissonance, when “reality” matters less than group ties. From that moment on, their actions are dedicated to proving loyalty and commitment and to accepting pain in order to eliminate alleged profiteers.

For the criminologist, hate crimes are par excellence moral crimes, carried out in the name of protecting the values held sacred by a given group. They seek, therefore, to maintain a given political, cultural and social order. Based on the “warrior code”, hate speech promotes violence, causing the “threatened” group to remain in constant tension against an imaginary enemy. The group’s capacity for reflection is reduced, because such speech seeks to prevent projection on the other, in order to affect individuals’ ability for empathy and for symbolic displacement. In this context, they do not negotiate, engage in dialogue or conclude agreements with groups deemed enemies, as these groups are regarded as criminals, corrupt, liars, invaders and traitors to the homeland.

Symbols associated with purity are among those that tend to be universal in the cultural organization of the I/Us idea as a stable and separate category. Violence seems to be justified in the name of preserving purity. As Williams (2021, p. 238) points out, “the act of cleaning after having your values challenged somehow washes away ‘moral stains’ and restores your ‘stable moral self’.” Such an act is present in religious cultures such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Christianity, among several others.

Williams (2021) also states that sacred symbols play a central role in building hatred. In his words, “sacred items that represent worldviews, like flags, statues of great figures and religious texts, seem to hold enough power that their destruction carries

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<sup>5</sup> Williams (2021) adapts the five stages of G. W. Allport’s Scale of Prejudice, in *The nature of prejudice* (1954).

meaning between cultures and beliefs, not only within.” (Williams, 2021, p. 248). Thus, the sacred works both as an organizer of internal “peace” and as a cathartic catalyst for “war” against the other, insofar as destroying the sacred of the outgroup has the power to purge endogenous negative emotions, as it occurs in the ritual of the “scapegoat”, in which sacrifice strengthens internal cohesion and group values.

At this point, the relationship between the sense of the sacred and the legitimation of war intensifies. Williams (2021, p. 259, emphasis added) adds that: “their extreme violence is *made legitimate* by the adoption of language like ‘struggle’, ‘battle’, ‘war’ and ‘resistance’. These words *neutralise* their horrific actions – the ‘*good fight*’ justifies the killing.” Studies on the use of violence for moral purposes consider both action and social acceptance to analyze the phenomenon. This may provide valuable keys for understanding the emergence, consolidation and expansion of the far right in contemporary Brazil.

Research conducted on the relationship between cleaning and the defense of community values has also shed light on the reasons behind the inactivity of civil society in the face of violence against minority groups, perceived as exogenous. Violence would be related not only to the acts of perpetrators, but also to the permissive action of larger groups not directly involved (Williams, 2021).

One of the images commonly used to accuse the enemy is precisely that of a pedophile, viewed as a predator of children, which represent the family offspring and collective reproduction. Whether perceived or real, the threat to childhood would be directly associated to a threat to the group, thus becoming one of the main triggers, as well as one of the arguments most frequently employed by extremist groups to generate moral panic (Williams, 2021).

In addition, we should highlight that sacrifice is also linked to the losses of those who have given or are willing to give their lives to the social group. Each loss is directly related to mythical memory, as the cult of the dead or of those threatened with either physical or symbolic death constitutes a ritual of respect for tradition and ancestry.

Zucal (2017, p. 9, our translation) assesses how the concepts of sacrifice and heroism organize the narratives of the Argentine security forces regarding violence. He affirms that “[...] the rhetoric of those who have fallen ‘in the line of duty’ fosters the notion of sacrificed victims, overvaluing the work of uniformed personnel. The ‘grammar’ of sacrifice reinforces notions of heroism and overshadows what is inherently laborious about these workers.” He asserts that “[...] sacrifice constitutes a repertoire of distinction. [...] The risk, the eventuality of death and the perceived abuse of their vital time are constructed as rites that demarcate a way of being”<sup>6</sup> (Zucal, 2017, p. 9, our translation).

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<sup>6</sup> Original excerpts: “Asimismo, la retorica de los caídos ‘en cumplimientos del deber’ abona en la noción de víctimas sacrificadas, sobrevalorando las labores de los uniformados. La ‘gramática del sacrificio refuerza las nociones de heroísmo y opaca lo que tienen de trabajadores estos trabajadores. Decíamos que el sacrificio constituye un repertorio de distinción. Analisaremos cómo el riesgo, la eventualidad de la muerte y las percepciones de abuso para con sus tiempos vitales son construidos como hitos demarcatorios de una forma de ser” (Zucal, 2017, p. 9).

Thus, the repertoire of sacrifice underlies political strategies related to strengthening the connection between sacrificed individuals and representations of their offerings for societal well-being, which stand in opposition to values and practices such as selfishness and idleness. Again, for Zucal (2017, p. 9-10, our translation), “the sacrificed and the sacrificiable extol their surrender – conceived as selfless – and transform it into a marker of superiority in comparison with examples of comfort and selfishness.”<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the violence carried out, it is interesting to also consider the existence of a kind of “projected” or “outsourced” violence, which we propose as a tool to analyze the way in which a social being or group feels imaginarily represented and positively affected (*páthos*) by the violent acts of those who effectively commit them, such as the institutions that monopolize violence (the Armed and Police Forces) and the ones that ideologically legitimate it for its divine character (Churches) or political desirability (politics turned into anti-politics). Through this type of violence, different social groups express broad support or remain silent in the face of violent acts perpetrated by state agents. Therefore, by these means, society – materialized in the modern idea of “the people” – explicitly or implicitly authorizes the violence of those who actually commit it.<sup>8</sup>

In our view, studies of argumentation and discourse can contribute to understanding violent rationality (*logos*), by examining how the *polis* is persuaded (*páthos*) to deliberate on and accept exceptional measures. This involves mobilizing commonplaces (*ethos*) capable of justifying the choice of violence as the best course of action for managing the community and common good (on rhetorical concepts, see Amossy, 2021; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2014; Vitale, 2016).

Based on the above, we can state that the argumentative model of war and its premises, rooted in the need to eliminate the other, connect the realm of the sacred to violence in order to legitimate and justify the use of force to resolve conflicts between antagonistic social groups, which would engage in a mimetic struggle for power. In this way, violence is regarded as just and necessary for the conservation of a given

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<sup>7</sup> Original excerpt: “Los sacrificados y sacrificables enaltecen su entrega – concebida como abnegada – y la transforman en mojon de superioridad por comparación con ejemplos de comodidad y egoísmo” (Zucal, 2017, p. 9-10).

<sup>8</sup> We refer here to the #*Eu autorizo* [#I authorize you] campaign of May 2021 and November 2022. In the first case, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, “groups demonstrated in favor of President Jair Bolsonaro on Saturday afternoon (5/1) in several Brazilian states. The main flags raised by the demonstrators were: defending the unrestricted opening of trade during the pandemic, against the actions of the Federal Supreme Court and opposing governors and mayors contrary to the Bolsonaro administration. [...] Among the most chanted slogans were ‘Bolsonaro, I authorize you’ and ‘The president is coming’” (BBC, 2021, p. 1). In the second, after the 2022 presidential elections, “Shouting ‘I authorize you’, Bolsonaroists fill the Armed Forces Rio headquarters. Dressed in green and yellow and holding Brazilian flags, supporters of the President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro (PL), carry banners calling for ‘federal intervention’” (Gonçalves, 2022, p. 1). Original excerpts: “grupos fizeram manifestações a favor do presidente Jair Bolsonaro na tarde deste sábado (1º/5) em diversos Estados do Brasil. As principais bandeiras levantadas pelos manifestantes foram: defender a abertura irrestrita do comércio durante a pandemia, ser contra as ações do Supremo Tribunal Federal e se contrapor a governadores e prefeitos opositores à gestão Bolsonaro. [...] Entre as palavras de ordem mais entoadas pelos manifestantes estava ‘Bolsonaro, eu te autorizo’ e ‘O presidente está chegando’” (BBC, 2021, p. 1). “Aos gritos de ‘eu autorizo’, bolsonaristas lotam sede das Forças Armadas no Rio Vestidos de verde e amarelo e segurando bandeiras do Brasil, os apoiadores do presidente da República, Jair Bolsonaro (PL), carregam faixas pedindo ‘intervenção federal’” (Gonçalves, 2022, p. 1).

social order, going beyond the polemical modality of argumentation (Amossy, 2021) to ritually transfer the responsibility for the aggression and death of the other to sacred symbolic categories, exogenous to Me/Us. This implies that signifying violence “in the name of” a sacred cause allows the purpose of such action to be transferred to a higher power, thus suppressing internal guilt, as it would ultimately consist in a moral duty.

## War as an argumentative model in the history of the West

Carrizo (2023) links the emergence of the “tragic hero” in Antiquity, in authors such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, to the narrative organization of the “historical subject”, as found in the historiographical works of Thucydides and Herodotus. According to the Chilean scholar, the paradoxical relationship between politics and war in Classical Greece is directly tied to what he calls the ontology of contrariety, that is, a worldview that interprets the dynamics of social relations through the essentialization of metaphysical forces in constant conflict. For the Greeks, war was thus an inherent part of nature – both cosmological and human – such that the basic model of the Greek man was the citizen-soldier. From this perspective, politics is war and martial ethics is political, in contrast to European modernity, when war and politics became mutually exclusive.

The researcher argues that Greek war rhetoric instituted the duty of war, which functioned as an instrument for selecting and verifying values and defining social hierarchies. Rooted in this martial mentality, the concept of the “beautiful death” emerged – that is, the beauty and value of dying in combat, aesthetically glorifying heroic actions as acts of salvation for the polis against the enemy (Carrizo, 2023).

Through warlike elegy, “[...] the power of war configures and disfigures the world inhabited by these bodies – men, citizens and soldiers, poets and warriors – in whose language and action, winners and losers tremble as they embrace both valor and dread, honor and horror [...]” (Carrizo, 2023, p. 87, our translation). In war, be it tragic or military, as well as in politics, the fearful materiality of language unites the performative and destructive power, responsible for figuring, configuring and disfiguring the world, organized by a constant interplay of forces that “merge the destructive and the creative (powers) in an eternal embrace” [*funden en abrazo eterno lo destructivo y creativo*] (Carrizo, 2023, p. 87, our translation). In Aeschylus, for example, the consecration of the martial ethos can be found in the solemnity of war, highlighting the mythical foundations of the sovereign power of the gods, rooted in the fusion of strength and violence and in the glorification of the warlike vocation and taste of Greek culture.

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<sup>9</sup> Original excerpt: “En la elegía bélica y en el amplio espectro de la literatura griega antigua se aprecia aquella contrariedad trágica donde la potencia de la guerra configura y desfigura el mundo habitado por estos cuerpos, hombres, ciudadanos y soldados, poetas y guerreros, en cuyo lenguaje y acción, vencedores y vencidos, se abrazan trémulos al valor y al pavor, al honor y al horror que les depara el preludio y el desolador epílogo de la batalla” (Carrizo, 2023, p. 87).

The problem for Classical Greek culture was not war directed outward (*pólemos*), against the barbarians, but fratricidal wars (*stásis*) internal to the Hellenic peoples. Through the distinction between *pólemos* and *stásis*, two words associated with war, the Greeks differentiated good and bad strife (*Éris*). In the words of Carrizo (2023, p. 351-352, our translation, emphasis added), “[...] historically, war comes to assume a legal character and status, drawing a boundary and distinction between lawful and unlawful warlike action, between *licit, necessary and desirable violence*, as opposed to *illicit, seditious and condemnable violence*.”<sup>10</sup>

In summary, the scholar highlights three points in his analysis: First, that democracy in Classical Greece emerged as a war and political device; second, that the warlike condition of this political regime works as the axiomatics of a political rationality in which conflict and the antagonism of forces occupy a central position; third, that such rationality demonstrates the full intensity of its martial capacity when it perceives its supremacy to be materially threatened, thereby establishing itself as the foundational principle constitutive of order (Carrizo, 2023).

Chiricosta (2023) furthers this discussion by analyzing the relationship between the Greek war model and gender relations, aiming to deconstruct what she calls the myth of virile strength. The Italian philosopher understands myth as the collective account of a people that grounds a certain rationality and is fundamental to the social elaboration of meaning. In her words, Western society selected the Homeric epic of war as the founding narrative of its cultural self-perception and, as a result, its relationship with alterity over the centuries has been marked by domination and extermination rather than by openness to dialogue with Indigenous peoples of other continents. At the heart of this narrative, male martial strength and the political role of men, which underlie gender-based asymmetries and violence throughout Eurocentric history, are materialized in the definition of women as “the weaker sex”.

“The process of naturalization – that is, the process by which a social or cultural fact is assumed to be a ‘natural’ phenomenon, determining it as a law from which one cannot escape – assigns a kind of biological destiny to this virile dimension of war,” asserts Chiricosta (2023, p. 50, our translation). According to the scholar, “this hides the fact that both war and the male inclination toward violence are not realities determined by immutable laws inscribed in human DNA, but rather the result of long sociocultural processes [...]” (Chiricosta, 2023, p. 50, our translation).<sup>11</sup>

Moving forward to medieval Europe, it was in the 11th century, with the organization of the first crusade aimed at the conquest of the Holy Land, that the Christian idea

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<sup>10</sup> Original excerpt: “Vale decir que, históricamente la guerra va adoptando un carácter y un estatuto legal, trazando una frontera y distinción entre una acción bélica y otra ilegal, entre una violencia lícita, necesaria y deseable, em oposición a una violencia ilícita, sediciosa y condenable” (Carrizo, 2023, p. 351-2).

<sup>11</sup> Original excerpt: “El proceso de naturalización – es decir, el proceso mediante el que se asume un dato social o cultural como un fenómeno ‘natural’, determinándolo como una ley de la que no se puede escapar – asigna una especie de destino biológico a esta dimensión viril de la guerra. [...] Esto oculta el hecho de que tanto la guerra como la inclinación masculina a la violencia no son realidades determinadas por leyes inmutables inscritas en el ADN humano, sino el resultado de largos procesos socioculturales [...]” (Chiricosta, 2023, p. 50).

of nonviolence began to conceive the exercise of violence as a non-contradictory possibility, provided that its purpose was the defense of the Catholic religion. In this context, the Order of the Templars was created, composed of knights returning from the Middle East. In parallel, the concept of martyr was defined, as someone glorified for dying in defense of the Christian faith. With the return of the “soldiers of Christ” from the 11th century onward, Europe incorporated the concept of *yihad* (translated as “fighting in God’s path”) (Barbero, 2022, p. 23).

According to Barbero (2022, p. 46-47), the term *yihad* is repeated in several fragments of different suras in the Quran, such as the Sura of The Pilgrimage, which states: “Permission to take up arms is hereby granted to those who are attacked; they have suffered injustice. God has all the power to give victory to them. Those who were unjustly expelled from their homes only because they said, ‘God is our Lord’.”<sup>12</sup> For the Italian historian, this passage authorizes *yihad*, legitimates and justifies war or combat when attacked by infidels and establishes the right of self-defense against the enemies of God, relying on divine help to do so.

The development of this militant conception in the Islamic religious world is linked to the great Arab conquests undertaken in the 7th and 8th centuries, a period in which the Christian West was not threatened “externally”. This situation changed with the Holy War, from the 11th century onwards, which caused the idea of *yihad* to spread like wildfire across Europe.

In the 12th century, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (apud Barbero, 2022, p. 73, our translation) asserted that “[...] the knights of Christ, since they fight solely for the interests of Christ, incur no sin, for if they kill, they kill an enemy of Christ, and if they die, they do so for Christ.”<sup>13</sup> In this context, violence ceases to be a sin to become a duty; and war, if in the name of Christ or a savior, ceases to be cursed to become blessed. This means that “[the] idea that those who die during the Crusades go straight to paradise, no matter what they have done, and that, therefore, killing infidels is, in any case, a somewhat commendable act, is ultimately no longer up for debate,”<sup>14</sup> highlights Barbero (2022, p. 42, our translation).

Centuries later, the relationship between the sacred and violence remains central to explain the *Anatomy of Fascism*. On this matter, Paxton (2004, p. 42) ponders that “the ‘mobilizing passions’ of fascism are hard to treat historically, for many of them are as old as Cain.” In other words, they are rooted in what we have called, following

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<sup>12</sup> Original excerpt: “Se ha concedido permiso para hacer la guerra a quienes combaten, porque fueron vejados – ciertamente, Dios es todopoderoso para su auxilio –, a quienes fueron expulsados, sin derecho, de sus casas, porque decían: ‘Nuestro Señor es Dios’” (Barbero, 2022, p. 46-47). For the English translation, we used the version available at <https://al-islam.org/christians-who-defended-and-died-prophet-muhammad-and-his-family-mateen-charbonneau/chapter-1-verses>.

<sup>13</sup> Original excerpt: “Los caballeros de Cristo, como luchan sólo por los intereses de Cristo, no incurrn en pecado alguno, ya que, si matan, matan a un enemigo de Cristo y, si mueren, lo hacen por Cristo” (Barbero, 2022, p. 44).

<sup>14</sup> Original excerpt: “La idea de que quien muere durante las cruzadas va directamente al paraíso sin importar lo que haya hecho, y que, por lo tanto, matar a los infieles es, sea como sea, un acto algo loable, al final ya no se pone más en discusión” (Barbero, 2022, p. 42).

Pêcheux (2007), mythical memories, which are characterized by an apparent paradox, since they are immemorial memories.

Nevertheless, the American historian proposes a typology that intends to condense the main characteristics related to the “emotional lava that set fascism’s foundations” in the 20th century (Paxton, 2004, p. 41), namely: (i) a sense of overwhelming crisis; (ii) the primacy of the group, toward which one has duties superior to every right; (iii) the belief that one’s group is a victim, a sentiment that justifies any action; (iv) the dread of the group’s decline; (v) the need for closer integration of a purer community, by consent or by exclusionary violence; (vi) the need for authority by natural leaders (always male), culminating in a national chief who alone is capable of incarnating the group’s destiny; (vii) the superiority of the leader’s instincts over abstract and universal reason, the *logos*; (viii) the beauty of violence and the efficacy of will, when they are devoted to the group’s success; (ix) the right of the chosen people to dominate others without restraint, right being decided by the sole criterion of the group’s prowess within a Darwinian struggle (Paxton, 2004, p. 41).

Bataille (1979, p. 16), also addressing the totalitarian political phenomenon, argued that “in the first place, fascist power is characterized by a foundation that is both religious and military, in which these two habitually distinct elements cannot be separated: it thus presents itself from the outset as an accomplished concentration.” He emphasizes, moreover, that the predominant aspect in this relationship is the military one, since the affective ties that associate or identify the leader with the party member are analogous to those seen in the relationship between a commander and their soldiers.

Similarly, Finchelstein (2022, p. viii) defines fascism as “[...] a philosophy of political action that ascribes an absolute political and mythical value to violence and war in the political realm. It conceives of the political field as rooted in primordial instincts and violence.” Thus, pure violence comes to underpin political power. In addition, for Finchelstein (2022, p. viii), “[...] the sacrifice of the body – either in the form of self-sacrifice or as a direct sacrificial action toward the Other – obeys the mandates of a radical mythical ideology.” The Argentine historian affirms that, in fascism, there is a displacement of the classical myth of the hero and other associated myths, such as that of Prometheus and the power of fire, toward the mythification of the modern leader. In short, there are no distinctions between myth, power and violence in this ideology.

In line with the aforementioned authors, Cesarino (2022) argues that the emergence of populism in the 21st century is directly associated with the remission to mythical structures, such as the scapegoat and the function of sacrifice, which refer to the experience of the sacred as a means to legitimate bloodshed and promote war in the name of the group’s salvation. To this end, populist discourses promote moral panic, articulated by the argumentative structure *Us vs. Them*, responsible for organizing the imaginary invasion of the physical and moral body of *Us* by an *Other* considered corrupt, impure, parasitic etc. Fundamentally, such groups seek to reverse the world, turn it inside out, thus rendering positive what is morally negative for the Modern State. To this end, they mobilize messianic narratives that offer cognitive shortcuts to

escape complex social dilemmas, a phenomenon exponentially amplified by digital platformization.

If political discourse may be defined as the space intended for negotiation, for openness to the *logos* of the other – thereby allowing exchanges and interactions between distinct communities – the logic of war works to destroy relations of trust among social groups, as well as to foster unbridled competition between them, ultimately producing closure to difference. This undermines collaborative and solidarity-based bonds. In the words of Cesarino (2022, p. 213, our translation), “the body itself is a structuring symbol of the pure-impure metacode in countless cultures, if not in all of them. [...] [T]his metacode also operates in the way how conspiracy theories delimit and control the boundaries between individual and collective bodies.”<sup>15</sup>

Hence, it is so common that conspiracy theories focus on topics that can arouse social anxieties and foster moral panics, such as the integrity, safety, purity and reproduction of the collective body, which are expressed in themes such as violations, manipulations, inoculations, transformations, surveillance or sterilization of individual bodies (Cesarino, 2022). Based on the above, let us see how these issues connect to Bolsonaro’s political discourse.

### **Politics as mythical war: mythical memory, lexical analysis and the Them vs. Us structure**

In the previous sections, we examined the intrinsic relationship between the sacred, war and politics in the moral legitimation of violence across different historical moments.<sup>16</sup> Rooted in the religious ritual of sacrifice – of oneself (a gift for societal good) and of the other (scapegoat) – as well as in the military logic of eliminating the enemies of the polis (*pólemos*), the rhetoric of war seems to be fundamental to the constitution of a grammar of intolerance in contemporary Brazil. This grammar resumes the concept of the internal enemy from the Brazilian Military Dictatorship’s National Security Doctrine and associates it with the more recent conception of Cultural War against social movements, especially identity-based ones (see Rocha, 2021; Morais; Moita Lopes, 2024). Thus, it projects differences from the imaginary of normality as threats that must be fought to guarantee the physical and symbolic survival of Us, eliminating

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<sup>15</sup> Original excerpt: “o próprio corpo é um símbolo estruturante do metacódigo puro-impuro em inúmeras culturas, se não em todas. [...] [E]sse metacódigo também opera no modo como os conspiracionismos delimitam e controlam as fronteiras entre corpos individuais e coletivos”.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Bloom (2017, emphasis added) reflects on the possibility that “moral violence” operates as “the root of all cruelty”: “In many instances, violence is neither a cold-blooded solution to a problem nor a failure of inhibition; most of all, it doesn’t entail a blindness to moral considerations. On the contrary, morality is often a motivating force... *Moral violence*, whether reflected in legal sanctions, the killing of enemy soldiers in war, or punishing someone for an ethical transgression, is motivated by the recognition that its victim is a moral agent, someone fully human.” For the purpose of our research, we will rename “moral violence” as “violence of the order”, as it is rooted in the cosmic, natural and social premise of maintaining a certain *status quo*.

any possibility of collaboration, cooperation or argumentation on controversial issues and any project of a plural community that includes Them.

“Few died. The Military Police (PM) should have killed a thousand,” said Deputy Jair Bolsonaro on October 2nd, 1992, commenting on the Carandiru Massacre, when agents of the São Paulo Military Police killed 111 inmates. On May 23rd, 1999, he declared on national television: “He deserved it: the *pau de arara* [a torture method]. It works. I’m in favor of torture. You know that. And the people are in favor of it too.” In the same show on Rede Bandeirantes, he added: “You won’t change anything in this country through voting, nothing, absolutely nothing! Unfortunately, it will only change if one day we go into civil war, and do the work the military regime failed to do: kill about 30,000.” He continued to sentence, “starting with FHC [Fernando Henrique Cardoso, then President of the Republic], don’t exile, kill! If a few innocents die, fine, innocents die in every war.” On November 20th, 2017, he continued along the same lines, arguing that “[i]f 40,000 criminals die [annually, as a result of police action], we have to move up to 80,000. There is no other way. You can’t fight violence with peace and love policies.” Finally, on November 27th, 2017, he proposed that “[...] these police officers should be decorated. A police officer who doesn’t kill isn’t a real police officer” (Barreto Jr., 2022, p. 16, 24, 56, 57).<sup>17</sup>

As we can see from the excerpts above, the political discourse of Jair Bolsonaro – a parliamentarian since 1991 – has been characterized throughout his career by the promotion and exaltation of violence as a marker of strength against an internal enemy, and by the pride in the crimes of the Military Dictatorship, supposedly necessary for the country’s “pacification”. However, it is still necessary to understand how and when this discourse began to acquire legitimacy as a political project of power, which won the 2018 Presidential Elections. In other words, when did his arguments move from the realm of the interdicted/taboo, of madness and irrationality, to become inscribed in the enunciative position of truth, endowed with authorship, subject to comments – positive and negative – and following certain rituals of public speech<sup>18</sup>, through which deliberative proposals are elaborated in the name of the common good and happiness?

The analysis of the political discourse of the far right compels us to question the enunciative conditions that underpin a kind of inversion of the argumentative logic in

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<sup>17</sup> Original excerpts: “Morreram poucos. A PM tinha que ter matado mil”. “Ele merecia isso: pau de arara. Funciona. Eu sou favorável à tortura. Tu sabe disso. E o povo é favorável a isso também”. “[...] através do voto, você não vai mudar nada nesse país, nada, absolutamente nada! Só vai mudar, infelizmente, se um dia nós partirmos para uma guerra civil aqui dentro, e fazendo o trabalho que o regime militar não fez: matando uns 30 mil”. “começando pelo FHC, não deixar para fora, não, matando! Se vai morrer alguns inocentes, tudo bem, tudo quanto é guerra morre inocente”. “[s]e morrerem 40 mil bandidos [por ano, em decorrência das ações da polícia], temos que passar para 80 mil. Não há outro caminho. Não dá para combater violência com políticas de paz e amor”. “[e]sses policiais têm que ser condecorados. Policial que não mata não é policial” (Barreto Jr., 2022, p. 16, 24, 56, 57).

<sup>18</sup> Foucault (1981) highlighted a set of *external procedures of exclusion of speech*, such as interdiction, reason-madness opposition and true-false opposition, as well as *internal procedures*, namely, the commentary, the author and the disciplines. Finally, there is a third group, linked to the *rituality of speech*, “which permit the control of discourses, [which operates by] determining the condition of their [the discourses’] application, of imposing a certain number of rules on the individuals who hold them, and thus of not permitting everyone to have access to them” (Foucault, 1981, p. 61).

Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (2014), insofar as it is based on the transformation of discourse into force, truth into lie, prudence into arrogance and the denial of violence into its glorification. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2014), argumentation, the core of political discourse, presupposes respect for the interlocutor's adherence and the pursuit of rational persuasion. In addition, rhetorical practice in a given society is directly related to the preservation and strengthening of the institutions responsible for regulating discussions, as well as to the promotion of argumentative thinking and the actions linked to it, expressing the commonplaces of a community (Perelman; Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2014).<sup>19</sup>

By commonplaces, the New Rhetoric understands premises of a very general order that function as a kind of "repository of arguments". Given their vast generality, they can be used in any circumstance, and are therefore essential for classifying arguments. Such places are divided into *loci of quantity* and *loci of quality*. The first assert that one thing is better than another for quantitative reasons, while the second contests the virtue of numerical primacy. In the case of quality, what is considered true cannot be denied by the primacy of quantity, as it is a value of superior and incomparable order. Its positive axiology is linked to uniqueness, originality and mystery (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2014).

Bolsonaro's political discourse leverages both loci, of quantity and quality, to acquire legitimacy among Brazilian society. On the one hand, he frequently emphasizes Brazil's Christian majority, suggesting other religious denominations or atheists must conform to the dominant group. On February 15th, 2017, for example, Deputy Jair Bolsonaro (at the time, affiliated with the Social Christian Party – PSC-RJ<sup>20</sup>) stated: "We are a Christian country. There is no such thing as a secular state. The state is Christian. [...] Minorities must bow to majorities. Minorities either adapt or just disappear."<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, he often draws a distinction from the "impure" by attributing sacred qualities to Us and to actions carried out in the name of Christian virtues. On June 25th, 2022, already serving as President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro declared at the March for Jesus: "One side supports abortion, the other is against it; one side supports the family, the other increasingly seeks to erode its values; one side is against gender ideology, the other is in favor of it." He continued: "One side wants its people to bear *arms*, so that the shadow of those who want to steal our *sacred* freedom is pushed

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<sup>19</sup> In this regard, see especially the section Argumentation and Violence (p. 61-65). On the loci of quality and quantity, analyzed below, see page 97 to 104.

<sup>20</sup> President Jair Bolsonaro has been affiliated with several parties throughout his political career, namely: from 1988 to 1993, the Christian Democratic Party; from 1993 to 1995, the Reform Progressive Party; from 1995 to 2003, the Brazilian Progressive Party; from 2003 to 2005, the Brazilian Labor Party; in 2005, the Liberal Front Party; from 2005 to 2016, the Progressive Party; from 2016 to 2018, the Christian Social Party; in 2018, he joined the Social Liberal Party, with which he was elected president.

<sup>21</sup> Original excerpt: "Somos um país cristão. Não existe essa historinha de Estado laico, não. O Estado é cristão. [...] As minorias têm que se curvar às maiorias. As minorias se adequam ou simplesmente desaparecem".

further away; and I have said it: *armed people* will never be enslaved” (Barreto Jr., 2022, p. 52; 645, emphasis added).<sup>22</sup>

According to Amossy (2021), a pluralistic society must foster tools for polemic expression, aiming to disallow violence and stimulate its positive functions, such as: persuasion, by proposing to influence and dominate the other; social bonds, by establishing relationships and promoting group unity; protests, by voicing opposition in public debates; and positioning, by enabling effective debate strategies. Thus, managing dissent could safeguard the right to diversity and stimulate social politicization. The deepening of polarization, however, leads to dichotomization, wherein groups adopt irreconcilable antagonistic positions, essentializing “Us” and “Them”. Right and wrong, good and evil, included and excluded and moral and immoral are framed in absolute terms, hyperbolic attacks are launched and fear and hatred are promoted.

In the words of Amossy (2021, p. 38, emphasis added), “[...] the rhetoric of polarization consists of establishing *enemy camps* and is, for this reason, a social phenomenon rather than an abstract division into opposing and irreconcilable theses.” The challenge of this approach seems to arise exactly at the limits of the relationship between rhetoric and violence – something already pointed out by Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (2014). According to Amossy (2021, p. 141, emphasis added), “when a participant in the polemical exchange does not respect its rules or outrageously crosses the limits, he undermines his own self-image,” given that “[the] *ethos* of a sore loser or of a person who does not master appropriate social codes discredits the arguer who tries to *disqualify* the adversary. Needless to say, this autoregulation is far from being perfect.” Bearing this in mind, Amossy (2021, p. 143) concludes that more studies on the relationship between polemics and violence are necessary. She states that “[the] question of the limits assigned to verbal violence remains open and continues to challenge not only ethical judgment, but also the legitimacy of censorship and the measures that the legal system should take.”

According to Rocha (2021), we are not experiencing polarization, but rather radicalization. Polarization is characterized by the opposition between two poles, which need one another to exist. Even if they do not merge, since there is a tense relationship that sets them against each other, they are based on the recognition of alterity and on mutual respect. Radicalization, on the contrary, seeks to eliminate differences, given that the extremist pole views the world as a mirror of itself.

He asserts that, for the Brazilian far right’s rhetoric of hate, there is no political adversary, but rather the enemy to be eliminated. This aligns with the ideological view forged in the depths of the Dictatorship as a reaction to the accusations brought forth by the *Brasil Nunca Mais* [Brasil Never Again] project. The historian understands that, nowadays, there is an intersection between this militaristic perspective which

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<sup>22</sup> Original excerpts: “Um lado defende o aborto, o outro é contra; um lado defende a família, o outro quer cada vez mais desgastar os seus valores; um lado é contra a ideologia de gênero, o outro é favorável”. “um lado quer que seu povo se arme, para que cada vez mais se afaste a sombra daqueles que querem roubar essa nossa tão *sagrada* liberdade; e eu tenho dito: *povo armado* jamais será escravizado” (Barreto Jr., 2022, p. 52; 645).

validates the dictatorial experience – past, present and future – and Christian religious fundamentalism, especially within certain neo-Pentecostal denominations (Rocha, 2021).<sup>23</sup>

Seeking to assess the process of formation, transformation and consolidation of Jair Bolsonaro’s political discourse throughout his career, Morais; Moita Lopes (2024) collected 922 pronouncements delivered by the then congressman between 2000 and 2018, filed as shorthand notes by the House of Representatives. The study’s main objective was to qualitatively and quantitatively compare the diachronic frequency of lexical items related to military and religious discourses in the deputy’s speech, with the primary aim of providing a lexical description of what they called the “moral turnaround” of the far right.

For this purpose, the collected pronouncements were divided into two databases, one comprising 499 speeches delivered from 2000 to 2010 – containing 283,012 words – and another comprising 423 speeches delivered from 2011 to 2018 – containing 151,355 words – totaling 434,367. To this end, 2011 was considered the year of the “moral turnaround” in his discourse, when he began to incorporate religious fundamentalist themes into his traditionally militarist speeches (see Morais; Moita Lopes, 2024).

It should be noted that in said year some of the main “conservative triggers” of recent decades took place, such as the assumption of Dilma Rousseff (PT) as President of the Republic, a female former guerrilla continuously associated with the male ethos; the proposal of the Anti-Homophobia School Kit by the Ministry of Education, at the time headed by Fernando Haddad (PT); the establishment of the Truth Commission to investigate crimes that encompassed the period of the Military Dictatorship; and the recognition of same-sex civil unions by the Federal Supreme Court (Morais; Moita Lopes, 2024).

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<sup>23</sup> We complement this reasoning with Teles (2018, p. 71, our translation, emphasis added): “The background of militarization in recent history lies in the *ideology of the internal enemy* elaborated during the dictatorship and refined in recent decades. Democracy has maintained the concept of *public security as a war against the enemy*, comprised by ‘outlaws’, social movement militants, young Black and poor individuals, people with mental illnesses, traffickers, LGBTI individuals and Indigenous peoples. In June 2013 and at other moments of conflict exceeding the average accepted by containment policies (high school occupations, ‘Não vai ter Copa’ [There will be no World Cup movement], ‘Fora Temer’ [Temer Out! protests], housing struggles), police repression was combined with the *praise for the hygienist and pacifying power*. On the one hand, the ‘*good citizen*’ emerged, an *orderly* worker (or owner); on the other, there was the vagabond, the vandal, the drug addict, the troublemaker, the individual beyond the boundaries that define what is possible and authorized by the *order*. *Violence is legitimized by combining fear with the perception of a force above the law*. The norm is imposed by force (and relies on laws) and its logic is the production of the *abnormal*, the *pathological*, against which it must act rigorously, to *cure, eliminate* or, at least, *annul it*.” Original excerpt: “O pano de fundo da militarização na história recente é a *ideologia do inimigo interno* elaborada na ditadura e potencializada nas últimas décadas. A democracia manteve a concepção de *segurança pública como guerra contra o inimigo*, este variando entre ‘bandidos’, militantes de movimentos sociais, jovens negros e pobres, loucos, traficantes, pessoas LGBTIs, indígenas. Em junho de 2013 e em outros momentos de conflitos fora da mídia aceita pelas políticas de contenção (ocupações secundaristas, ‘Não vai ter Copa’, ‘Fora Temer’, luta por moradia), combinou-se a repressão policial e o *elogio do poder higienizante e pacificador*. Cria-se, de um lado, o ‘*cidadão de bem*’, trabalhador (ou proprietário) e *ordeiro*, de outro, o vagabundo, vândalo, drogado, arruaceiro, o indivíduo fora das bordas que delimitam o possível autorizado pela *ordem*. *Por meio da combinação do medo com a percepção de uma força acima das leis, legitima-se a violência*. A norma se impõe pela força (e apoia-se nas leis) e sua lógica é a da produção do *anormal*, do *patológico*, em relação ao qual ela deve agir com rigor para *curá-lo, eliminá-lo* ou, ao menos, *anulá-lo*”.

Based on this, a list of 20 relevant words in the debate about the Brazilian far right was compiled, with 10 (ten) representing ultraconservative military discourse and 10 (ten) representing religious fundamentalism. Using the AntConc software (Anthony, 2022), we conducted a lexical count. In addition, Excel was used to distribute word occurrences across pronouncements. That is, the researchers were interested not only in describing the frequency of the selected words, but also the number of pronouncements in which they occurred, in order to assess whether the influence of the evaluated themes increased or decreased in his pronouncements over time. (Morais; Moita Lopes, 2024).

For this text, we resumed these data, framing them in a different problem: describing and explaining the enunciative characteristics associated with the war rhetoric, considered the argumentative model of the contemporary Brazilian far right. This model allows two advances at once: The first, on the relationship between mythical memory (Pêcheux, 2007) – with transhistorical and transdiscursive tendencies – and the emergence of authoritarian movements in different contexts; the second, on the relationship between rhetoric and violence, based on the proposals of Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (2014) and Amossy (2021). Fundamentally, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between Bolsonaroist political discourse and its grounding in the concept of order. Such concept appears to function as a centripetal force for the foundation of morality in different societies. We also wish to discuss the sacred and profane aspects of the practice of war, at least in Western tradition. The table may be found below.

**Table 1** – Lexical comparison between Christian conservative and military ultraconservative discourses

FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIAN DISCOURSE	KEY WORD (2000-2010)	KEY WORD (2011-2018)	PRON. (2000-2010)	PRON. (2011-2018)
*SEX* <sup>24</sup>	53 (0.001%)	285 (0.01%)	17 (3.4%)	67 (15.8%)
FAMILY	120 (0.004%)	197 (0.01%)	36 (7.2%)	88 (20.8%)
GOD	88 (0.003%)	114 (0.007%)	66 (13.2%)	81 (19.1%)
*MORAL*	80 (0.002%)	56 (0.003%)	59 (11.8%)	43 (10.1%)
GAY	24 (0.0008%)	173 (0.01%)	8 (1.6%)	54 (12.7%)
LGBT	3 (0.0001%)	69 (0.004%)	2 (0.4%)	28 (6.6%)
LESBIAN*	11 (0.0003%)	55 (0.003%)	4 (0.8%)	24 (5.6%)
CROSS-DRESSER	5 (0.0001%)	51 (0.003%)	4 (0.8%)	25 (5.9%)
PEDOPHILIA	0	31 (0.002%)	0	11 (2.8%)
GENDER IDEOLOGY	0	8 (0.0005%)	0	8 (1.8%)

<sup>24</sup> Asterisks refer to the search for related words. For example, the search command \*SEX\* comprises words such as bisexual(s), homosexual(s), transexual(s), etc. In the case of milit\*, with the asterisk only on the right, AntConc included words such as **military(s)**, **militarism** and **militarization**.

ULTRACONSERVATIVE MILITARY SPEECH	KEY WORD (2000-2010)	KEY WORD (2011-2018)	PRON. (2000-2010)	PRON. (2011-2018)
MILIT*	2265 (0.08%)	531 (0.03%)	372 (74.5%)	174 (41.1%)
ARMED* FORCE*	799 (0.02%)	216 (0.01%)	267 (53.5%)	118 (27.8%)
ARMY	643 (0.02%)	143 (0.009%)	233 (46.6%)	72 (17%)
CRIM*	168 (0.005%)	155 (0.01%)	87 (17.4%)	104 (24.5%)
DEMOCR*	182 (0.006%)	209 (0.01%)	105 (21%)	105 (24.8%)
DICTATOR*	140 (0.004%)	157 (0.01%)	69 (13.8%)	82 (19.3%)
POLIC*	169 (0.005%)	93 (0.006%)	72 (17.4%)	32 (7.5%)
KIDNAP*	180 (0.006%)	63 (0.004%)	30 (6%)	40 (9.4%)
SAFETY	132 (0.004%)	76 (0.005%)	79 (15.8%)	42 (9.9%)
VIOL*	62 (0.002%)	45 (0.002%)	42 (8.4%)	29 (6.8%)

Source: Morais and Moita Lopes (2024)

In the table, we can notice the striking presence of ultraconservative military discourse in Jair Bolsonaro's political discourse, as shown by the first two columns of keywords and pronouncements. Let us compare, for instance, the items \*sex\* and milit\*, which have the highest number of occurrences for each examined speech. In the case of \*sex\*, there were 53 (0.001%) lexical occurrences from 2000 to 2010 and 285 (0.01%) from 2011 to 2018, a tenfold increase in representativeness, as evidenced by the reduction of one decimal place. Regarding pronouncements, it grew from 17 (3.4%) to 67 (15.8%), respectively. In turn, milit\* had 2265 (0.08%) lexical occurrences in the first period and 531 (0.3%) in the second, decreasing from 372 (74.5%) pronouncements to 174 (41.1%). We wish to demonstrate that, although military issues, including those of public security, remain strong over the 18 years at hand, there is a growing balance with fundamentalist Christian discourse from 2011 onward.

This lexical (re)distribution in Bolsonaro's political discourse indicates he continued to seek loyalty among his traditional electoral bases, rooted in the apology of the Dictatorship and in efforts to reproduce the same patterns of violence of the order in the scope of law enforcement.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, he shifted semantically towards the characteristics of the new conservative electorate, primarily evangelical Christians, by incorporating lexical items associated with this religious field.

<sup>25</sup> According to Faganello (2015, p. 150, our translation, emphasis added), “[t]he Gun Caucus is the political representative of a set of ideas and attitudes based on the perception that the social context is marked by growing and constant insecurity and radical public *disorder*.” In this sense, “[t]here is an appraisal of police authority as a force endowed with radical autonomy, the *exaltation of the warrior virtues* and *heroism of the police figure* is combined with a [secularitarian-authoritarian] discourse that understands *violence as a purifying, legitimizing and resolving tool for social issues*.” Original excerpts: “[a] *Bancada da Bala* é a representante política de um conjunto de ideias e atitudes, que se fundamentam na percepção de que o contexto social está marcado por uma crescente e constante insegurança e *desordem pública radical*”. “[c]oncebe-se uma apreciação da autoridade policial como uma força portadora de uma autonomia radical, a *exaltação das virtudes guerreiras* e do *heroísmo da figura policial* se conjugam com um discurso [secularitário-autoritário] que entende a *violência como ferramenta purificadora, legitimadora e resolutive dos problemas sociais*”.

This interdiscursive fusion was fundamental for Bolsonaro to continue legitimating state violence by means other than the National Security Doctrine of the 1960s. He increasingly incorporated concepts associated with the sacred into his traditionally militaristic speeches. Through the sacred, the politician's war rhetoric drew closer to the rhetoric surrounding fallen heroes of the police and military forces, thus structuring a grammar of intolerance suited to 21st century fascism.<sup>26</sup> It was grounded in the mythical imaginary of sacrifice, heroism and the purifying narrative of tragedy to foster support. He is the *outsider* who became an *insider*, an incorruptible fighter in defense of morality and traditional values in Brazilian society, who, for this very reason, suffered an attempt on his life.

Continuing, the word “family” increased from 120 (0.004%) occurrences in the first period to 197 (0.01%) in the second, also expanding its presence in the number of pronouncements, from 36 (7.2%) to 88 (20.8%). The word God, used 88 (0.003%) times from 2000 to 2010, was used 197 (0.007%) times from 2011 to 2018. There was an increase in all lexical items associated with the “enemy field”, such as legislative proposals related to gender identity. For instance, Gay – excluding the uses of Gay Kit – rose from 24 (0.0008%) to 173 (0.01%) occurrences and from 8 (1.6%) to 54 (12.7%) pronouncements, similarly to LGBT, Lesbian(s) and Cross-dresser.

The keyword Armed Force(s), in turn, dropped from 799 (0.02%) to 216 (0.01%) occurrences, and its pronouncements, from 267 (53.5%) to 118 (27.8%). The word Army decreased from 643 (0.02%) to 143 (0.009%) occurrences. By proportionally reducing references to military ultraconservatism, balancing it with the religious one, Bolsonaro expanded the circulation, representativeness and pathematic effect of his political statements in the Brazilian public sphere. The strategy garnered implicit and explicit support as well as neutrality from broad sectors of civil society regarding issues considered fair and unquestionable, such as the defense of the Christian God, the traditional family based on sexuality, and private property through public security. In this sense, the violence of the order can only be legitimized and justified in light of violence projected by the audience, which imagines itself cathartically in the execution of real violence, authorizing it as a public outsourcing of private desires.

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<sup>26</sup> Regarding fascism and its contemporary expression in Brazil, Souza (2019, p. 253, our translation, emphasis added) states: “[...] The general context of contemporary neo-fascism seems to result from the process of political and social uprooting experienced by individuals, caused in the political sphere by changes in financial capitalism, currently dominant. Through a conscious political strategy that has destroyed or weakened unions, parties and associative capacities in general — especially among the popular classes — financial capitalism creates individual isolation as a defining feature of contemporary society. [...] This *isolated and defenseless individual* is plagued by an *aggressiveness* they do not understand. They either turn the anger they feel due to poverty and deprivation against themselves or channel it toward *scapegoats* built for this purpose.” Regarding the relationship between Bolsonarism and fascism, see Finchelstein (2020). Original excerpt: “[...] O contexto geral do neofascismo contemporâneo parece resultar do processo de desenraizamento político e social dos indivíduos provocado, na esfera política, pelas mudanças do capitalismo financeiro, hoje dominante. Por meio de uma política consciente que destruiu ou enfraqueceu sindicatos, partidos e a capacidade associativa em geral — muito especialmente das classes populares —, o capitalismo financeiro cria o isolamento individual como marca da sociedade contemporânea. [...] Esse *indivíduo isolado e indefeso* é assolado por uma *agressividade* que não compreende e, desse modo, ele ou dirige contra si próprio a raiva que sente por sua pobreza e privação ou a canaliza contra *bodes expiatórios* construídos para esse fim”.

Two other lexical trends appear noteworthy: the increase in keywords linked to the debate on Democracy/Military Dictatorship and the decrease in those linked to public security. In the first case, the word democracy grew from 182 (0.006%) to 209 (0.01%) occurrences and maintained 105 pronouncements in each period, increasing in proportional importance from 21% to 24.8% in the 2011–2018 period. Simultaneously, the word Dictatorship increased from 140 (0.004%) to 157 (0.01%) occurrences and from 69 (13.8%) to 82 (19.3%) pronouncements.

The rise in occurrences of the lexical item Democracy does not imply support for this political regime, which would contradict his defense of the Military Regime since the 1990s. On the contrary, Nobre explains (2020), Bolsonaro promotes a semantic inversion that frames the Military Dictatorship as a democratic regime and Brazilian democracy as a Dictatorship. According to this view, Democracy began in Brazil in 1964, with the Military Coup, and ended in 1988, with the drafting of the “Citizen Constitution” – the actual starting point of the Dictatorship, with elements like Human Rights and political correctness.

In this manner, the enemy is ultimately represented by the state established under the 1988 Constitution and its defenders. At this juncture, moral standards in the country were allegedly inverted, as evidenced by rising crime rates and political corruption. The 1988 Magna Carta supposedly placed the enemies of the Military Regime in power, while good citizens began to be persecuted by communists, criminals and perverts (see also Rocha, 2021, who identifies the Orvil as the argumentative source of the Bolsonarist Hate Rhetoric).

The second relevant aspect is the decline in lexical occurrences related to public security in Bolsonaro’s speeches. Although there was a proportional growth in the words crim\* (crime, criminal, criminality, etc.), from 0.005% to 0.01%, and in pronouncements containing them, from 87 (17.4%) to 104 (24.5%), the other lexical items examined seemed to lose prominence. Polic\* (police, policeman/men) kept nearly the same proportional weight in terms of lexical usage, at 0.005% (169 occurrences) and 0.006% (93 occurrences), respectively, but dropped from 72 (17.4%) to 32 (7.5%) pronouncements. Security also showed a slight proportional increase in keywords – from 0.004% to 0.005% – and a decrease in pronouncements, from 79 (15.8%) to 42 (9.9%). Viol\* (violence, violent, etc.) retained its proportional impact, but fell from 42 (8.4%) to 29 (6.8%) pronouncements.

Thus, the incitement to public insecurity was balanced by the growth of moral issues. One aspect particularly relevant in Bolsonaro’s speeches is the legitimization of civil war (*stásis*) within the Brazilian political arena, something forbidden in Classical Greece, as observed by Carrizo (2023). As highlighted at the beginning of this section, in 1999 the deputy declared that “you won’t change anything in this country through voting, nothing, absolutely nothing! Unfortunately, it will only change if one day we go into civil war, and do the work the military regime failed to do: kill about 30,000” (Barreto Jr., 2022, p. 24). This reflects a kind of moral “boomerang effect”, in which the virtue of external war (*pólemos*) is turned inward, against one’s own people. This

people is continuously redefined through the expulsion/purging of large social sectors into the Them group (Teles, 2018).

The increase in urban insecurity, therefore, seems to internalize the legitimate violence of the order against civilian groups, expanding the combat model used against guerrilla groups to ever broader segments of society. This fuels a growing internal anthropophagic movement of the Brazilian people upon themselves,<sup>27</sup> responsible for reproducing the practices of the Dictatorship within our formal Democracy. These practices include torture, the extermination of marginalized groups, the concealment of bodies resulting from state violence and the police state presence in slums.

To legitimize this kind of internal *yihad*, forces associated with social and moral order create self-images associated with survival, portraying themselves as under attack from exogenous groups sharing the same territory as the ingroup. In this view, the savior is the hero and sacrifices himself for the sake of his own people/group. To this end, he fights those who do not share the same ethical values and legal norms. Instead of a Us x Them dynamic, there is an argumentative inversion to Them x Us, shifting the blame for the violence suffered onto groups perceived as transgressors of the social ideal.

Following Alonso's reflections (2018, p. 51), we may affirm that Bolsonaro discursively and argumentatively promotes an image of himself as a "flesh-and-blood hero", a humanized Messiah accessible to his followers. From this standpoint, Bolsonarism, a movement broader than Bolsonaro's political persona in itself (for Rocha, 2021, there is even a case to be made for a Bolsonarism *avant la lettre* within Brazilian elites), embodies a sort of anti-elitism, contrasting the "snobbish" and "intellectualized" elite with the middle-class "common man": "[...] this ethos of the common man is not rooted in the charisma of an exceptional leader. On the contrary, it is rooted in representativeness. Its strength emanates from the shared habits with the average Brazilian."<sup>28</sup> By presenting himself as an old-fashioned man, a family man and leader of the Bolsonaro clan, the deputy is recognized as a "myth", someone who "is one of us" (Alonso, 2018, p. 51, our translation).

To this end, evangelical churches act as guarantors of the relationship between militarism and fundamentalism, through the memory of the Holy War or the Crusades, playing a direct role in the elaboration of a hierarchizing moralism, according to Alonso (2018, p. 51). In the public sphere, the Evangelical Caucus seeks primarily to dominate agendas related to education, such as the Nonpartisan School Movement [Movimento Escola Sem Partido], opposing the "ideological contamination" of gender equality and the fight against homophobia (Alonso, 2018, p. 51).

Thus, in order to be considered legitimate and just, violence must be displaced from the temporal semantic field of the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) to the spiritual semantic field, in which Churches operate as Ideological State Apparatuses

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<sup>27</sup> I owe this reasoning to the category of self-imperialism proposed by Moser (2016).

<sup>28</sup> Original excerpt: "[e]sse éthos do homem comum não se ancora no carisma de líder excepcional. Ao contrário, se enraíza na representatividade. Sua força emana do compartilhamento de hábitos com a média dos brasileiros" (Alonso, 2018, p. 51).

(ISA).<sup>29</sup> Through this displacement, the legal struggle against crime is reframed as a religious struggle against evil. In this sense, the good citizen comes to see themselves as a soldier in the name of sacred causes, such as the homeland and its flag, the family and its property, and God and Their taboos. Their words and actions imply not only an axiological position, but also an ontological one, as they claim to speak on behalf of the Divine Being and to live or die to protect this ideal, the imaginary foundation of Us.

Let us note, for instance, how Bolsonaro's pronouncements began to associate homosexuality with pedophilia as of March 2011, linking it to a public policy that would allegedly promote homosexuality and gender ideology in schools if approved. He thus resumed the figure of the sexual predator and the danger of sexual invasion of children's bodies. Through these accusations, the parliamentarian sought to disqualify his enemy to the greatest possible extent as an imaginary monster, strategically preventing the positive re-signification of the lexical item by his political rivals: who could be in favor of pedophilia? Through the sacred, he generated collective moral panic and secured an absolute sense to anchor his discourse. The sacred ultimately expresses the untouchable. As a result, any advocacy for combating homophobia in schools came to be framed as a defense of homosexuality, a narrative that relied on digital platforms to gain wide circulation.

While the frequency of "pedophilia" says little from a quantitative point of view, from a qualitative perspective, it is quite powerful. First, like "gender ideology", it did not occur from 2000 to 2010. It began to be used argumentatively in 2011, preceding "gender ideology", which emerged in 2013 (Morais; Moita Lopes, 2024). Second, although "gender ideology" functions as an "umbrella" term for all indices of the moral crusade against gender discussions, the word "pedophilia" appeared almost four times more frequently, with 31 (0.002%) lexical occurrences compared to 8 (0.0005%) and 12 (2.8%) pronouncements versus 8 (1.8%). Third, the term's great capacity to generate sexual anxiety, commotion and conservative engagement in society emphasizes the transversal nature of its sacred meaning, placed as a locus of quality that distinguishes the good citizen from the enemy.

Regarded as apolitical, transparent and detached from the utilitarian contradictions of the mimetic struggle for power, the sacred stands as a kind of imaginary "safe zone" for maintaining social cohesion and for shaping the present and the future through categories of the past, always referring back to tradition. In our view, the practice of war – whether military or religious – expresses a tragic way of seeing and acting in the world, in which survival is conceived as the ground that legitimates and authorizes the exercise of violence against the other. Through war, the monster – or the one responsible for monstrous acts – sees themselves as a hero, switching the denial of violence for its glorification and interpreting their bloody actions as a way of purifying the world. In this case, the sacred's locus of quality is related to the ideological strategy of naturalizing violent meanings, rendering the exercise of violence desirable.

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<sup>29</sup> Regarding Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses, see Althusser (2020, p. 155-174).

Such violent actions are considered legitimate due to their symbolization as reactions to prior attacks, whether from political and legal institutions, alleged infiltrated communist guerrilla forces (symbolized by the color red) or gender identity groups (symbolized by the rainbow). Framed as a “just war”, they are presented as necessary for the group’s survival.

In this view, hate crimes can be understood as crimes against the meaning of existence of Them, that is, against the other’s sacred. The logic of war continuously fosters the imaginary anticipation of the other’s future actions, whether real or imaginary, in order to legitimize their own violent actions as expressions of defense – self-defense – rather than attack. For this reason, we believe it is preferable to understand the operation of intolerant thought through the inversion of the argumentative structure Us x Them, that is, hate groups build their image (*ethos*) as victims of a direct attack and organize their thinking (*logos*) discursively and argumentatively through *Them x Us*. The emotion (*páthos*) of fear is the affective cornerstone enabling the transfer of blame onto the other.

In short, war rhetoric is based on two distinct phases. In the first one – the discursive promotion of the state of war – fear and hate are collectively intensified in order to secure adherence to increasingly violent deliberative proposals and actions. This seems to have been responsible for Bolsonaro’s election to the Presidency of the Republic in 2018. In the second phase – the actual waging of war – violence is enacted, whether individually or collectively through attacks on any form of ideological opposition. This was evidenced by the rise in intolerant actions against groups deemed progressive in recent years.

## **Final considerations**

In the history of different human societies, war stands out among the social practices used to elaborate the mythical function of the use of force. According to Arendt (1970), the glorification of violence occurs when a given political view seeks to transform the *engagés* (the committed) into *enragés* (the enraged), allowing moralistic hypocrisy to override the sense of injustice. At the state level, institutions associated with an imaginary of apolitics or antipolitics gain legitimacy to colonize political logic “from within” or to violate it “from without”, while civil society is called upon – interpellated – to engage in struggle. Individuals become citizen-soldiers: good citizens who fight to protect the social order supposedly under threat.

This study aimed to present how Bolsonaro, as of 2011, managed to discursively condense two distinct practices associated with the mythical memories of the sacred and war, merging Churches and the Armed and Police Forces into a persuasive (inter) discourse. To this end, we organized our reflections into three distinct moments. First, we analyzed the relationship between the sacred and violence in the foundation of human societies. Next, we discussed the logic of war as an argumentative model in the

history of the West. Finally, in the last section, we proposed that conceiving politics as a mythical war reverses the argumentative structure usually associated with hate speech, from *Us x Them* to *Them x Us*. This inversion seeks to justify violence against an alleged invader of the social and moral body. Additionally, we examined how Congressman Jair Bolsonaro operated a strategic inflection in his political discourse beginning in 2011, when he promoted a “moral turnaround”, adding religious fundamentalism to military ultraconservatism.

As we have seen, there were four events in that year that underpin the ultraconservative backlash: the election of Dilma Rousseff, the draft of the Homophobia-Free School Educational Kit [Kit Escola Sem Homofobia], the establishment of the National Truth Commission and the legal recognition of same-sex civil unions by the Federal Supreme Court. Such moral turnaround, based mainly on the purported denunciation of the so-called “Gay Kit” [Kit Gay], was directly responsible for Bolsonaro’s rise from unimpressive congressman to President of the Republic, as well as for his transformation into the leading political voice articulating the conservative field in Brazil.

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MORAIS, Argus Romero Abreu de. A guerra como modelo retórico: memória mítica, léxico da ordem e inversão argumentativa *Eles x Nós* no discurso político da extrema direita brasileira. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v. 69, 2025.

- *RESUMO: No presente texto, temos por objetivo investigar o modelo retórico do discurso político da extrema direita brasileira na atualidade, especialmente, a relação entre memória mítica (Pêcheux, 2007), argumentação e violência (Perelman; Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2014; Amossy, 2017). Para tanto, realizamos uma análise lexical quali quantitativa de 922 pronunciamentos realizados pelo deputado Jair Bolsonaro na Câmara dos Deputados no período de 2000 a 2018. Dito isso, na primeira seção, discutimos a relação entre o sagrado e a violência na constituição das culturas, em especial no que concerne à organização moral do mundo e aos sentidos de ordem. Na segunda, realizamos uma análise histórica sobre a relação entre guerra e legitimação da violência no Ocidente. Na terceira, e última, tratamos dos problemas argumentativo-discursivos da nossa pesquisa, descrevemos o nosso método quali quantitativo de montagem do corpus e, por fim, realizamos as análises lexicais. Como conclusões, propomos a fusão dos discursos ultraconservador militar e fundamentalista religioso na organização do discurso político da extrema direita brasileira atual, a relação entre a retórica da guerra e a memória mítica e a estrutura argumentativa invertida *Eles x Nós*.*

- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Retórica da guerra; Memória mítica; Análise lexical quali-quantitativa; Eles x Nós; Extrema direita brasileira.*

## Data Availability Statement

All datasets supporting the findings of this study have been published within the article itself.

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