



**REFLECTIONS ON THE LANGUAGE OF INCIVILITY IN THE PANDEMIC:  
NEGATIONISM IN PRESIDENTIAL SPEECH**

***REFLEXÕES SOBRE A LINGUAGEM DA INCIVILIDADE NA PANDEMIA: O  
NEGACIONISMO NAS FALAS PRESIDENCIAIS***

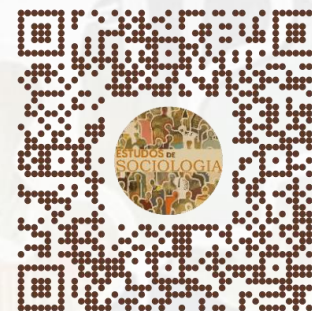
***REFLEXIONES SOBRE EL LENGUAJE DE LA INCIVILIDAD EN LA PANDEMIA:  
NEGACIONISMO EN DISCURSO PRESIDENCIAL***



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**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyzes the relations between the statements of former President Jair Bolsonaro during the pandemic and a language of incivility, based on the assumptions of Norbert Elias. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a set of recommendations from the World Health Organization, endorsed by epidemiologists and virologists, prescribed social isolation as fundamental to contain the infected curve. Against the backdrop of scientific guidelines, former President Jair Bolsonaro maintained a critical discourse on social isolation and focused on concentrating efforts on maintaining economic activity. In the context of a crisis caused by the pandemic, non-compliance and disallowance of certain norms are re-examined in the light of the hypothesis of a language of incivility, which suggests the importance of revisiting Elias's work with special attention to the analytical performance of the theory of civilizing processes for think about adherence to health standards throughout the pandemic.

**KEYWORDS:** Norbert Elias. Politic. Incivility. Government. Pandemic.

**RESUMO:** *Este artigo analisa as relações entre as declarações do então presidente da República Jair Bolsonaro no primeiro ano da pandemia e uma linguagem da incivilidade, baseado nos pressupostos de Norbert Elias. Durante a pandemia de Covid-19, um conjunto de recomendações da Organização Mundial de Saúde, referendadas por epidemiologistas e virologistas, prescrevia o isolamento social como fundamental para a contenção da curva de infectados. Na contramarcha das diretrizes científicas, o ex-presidente Jair Bolsonaro manteve um discurso crítico ao isolamento social e voltado para a concentração dos esforços na manutenção da atividade econômica. No contexto de crise provocada pela pandemia, o descumprimento e desautorização de certas normas é reexaminado à luz da hipótese de uma linguagem da incivilidade, o que sugere a importância em visitar o trabalho de Elias com atenção especial ao rendimento analítico da teoria dos processos civilizadores para pensar a adesão às normas sanitárias ao longo da pandemia.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Norbert Elias. Política. Incivilidade. Governo. Pandemia.*

**RESUMEN:** *En este artículo se analiza las relaciones entre las declaraciones del entonces presidente de la República Jair Bolsonaro en el primer año de la pandemia y un lenguaje de incivilidad, a partir de las tesis de Norbert Elias. Durante la pandemia de la Covid-19, un conjunto de recomendaciones de la Organización Mundial de la Salud, avaladas por epidemiólogos y virólogos, prescribieron el aislamiento social como fundamental para contener la curva de infectados. Contra los lineamientos científicos, Jair Bolsonaro mantuvo un discurso crítico sobre el aislamiento social y se centró en concentrar esfuerzos en mantener la actividad económica. En el contexto de la crisis provocada por la pandemia, se reexamina el incumplimiento y desconocimiento de normas a partir de la hipótesis de un lenguaje de incivilidad, lo que sugiere la importancia de visitar la obra de Elias con especial atención a la actuación analítica de la teoría de los procesos civilizatorios para pensar la adherencia a las normas sanitarias a lo largo de la pandemia.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Norbert Elias. Política. Incivilidad. Gobierno. Pandemia*

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## Introduction

In the first half of 2020, the public health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic demanded immediate responses from governments and heads of state, given the speed at which the virus spread around the world. The determination of contact restriction measures appeared to be the main containment resource, at which point a public debate gained prominence in Brazil based on criticism of social distancing. The debate took on political contours, polarized between groups that accused each other. In short, those who prioritized the economy on one side and those who defended the preservation of public health through social isolation on the other. This dissent fueled fights and disagreements between the branches of government, which profoundly affected public managers' ability to react to decisions. The then President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro, an advocate of vertical isolation, has clashed with governors, the Minister of Health, the legislature and the Supreme Court throughout the pandemic<sup>2</sup>.

Taking as an object of analysis the presidential pronouncements in 2020 documented in periodical newspapers, this paper seeks to reflect on the relationship between the theme of incivility and the denial of compliance with sanitary rules and reduction of the severity of the pandemic. Based on Norbert Elias' theory of civilizing processes, I seek to explore the hypothesis of the relationship between incivility and disregard for the recommendations of virologists and epidemiologists at a crucial moment for controlling the spread of the disease. After a presentation of his theoretical project, I analytically explore the ex-president's speech during the pandemic, taking as a reference the records of his denial of specialized recommendations. As a methodological procedure, I consider critical analysis as a process of signification that considers the social context and the production of political effects. In this study, the assumption is that of the articulation between language and society, crossed by practices, discourses and situations, according to the theses of Norman Fairclough (2016). In Brazil, recent works have turned their analysis in this direction, such as the presidential inauguration speech (GUIRADO, 2019), the critical analysis of the economic and social context

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<sup>2</sup> Bolsonaro declared numerous times that Brazil would be at war not with the virus, but with those who intend to "break the economy to hit the government". In his defense of the reopening of commerce and the normal movement of people as the pandemic progressed, he attacked decisions by the Supreme Court, governors and the then president of the Chamber of Deputies, Rodrigo Maia. More information on the topic at: [https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2020/05/17/interna\\_politica,1148039/como-a-guerra-entre-bolsonaro-e-governadores-pode-ferir-o-brasil.shtml](https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2020/05/17/interna_politica,1148039/como-a-guerra-entre-bolsonaro-e-governadores-pode-ferir-o-brasil.shtml); <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/04/ataques-entre-bolsonaro-e-maia-tem-de-velha-politica-a-socorro-a-pandemia-relembre-os-embates.shtml>; [https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2020/04/16/interna\\_politica,1139286/relembre-o-historico-de-confrontos-entre-bolsonaro-e-mandetta.shtml](https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2020/04/16/interna_politica,1139286/relembre-o-historico-de-confrontos-entre-bolsonaro-e-mandetta.shtml); <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/06/entenda-a-recente-tensao-entre-o-governo-bolsonaro-e-o-supremo-tribunal-federal.shtml>. Access: 19 Abr. 2021.

during the pandemic (AKAMINE *et al.*, 2022) and the construction of the discourse on human rights from the extreme right (CAVALCANTI; FERREIRA, 2020). As with these studies, the proposal here is to explore the bridges between discourses and the dynamics of social practices in networks and interaction, in the terms of Fairclough (2016). Nevertheless, the proposal here consists of a critical analysis in the light of the category of incivility, in the register of Elias' work, in order to verify the theoretical yield of studies focused on the content of presidential speeches.

The article is organized into three parts. Initially, I present the theoretical discussion involving civilizing processes in the light of the proposed object. This is followed by a conceptual exploration of incivility, taking the environment of political tensions and disputes as a backdrop. Finally, Jair Bolsonaro's speeches will be analyzed from the perspective of disregard for health standards and scientific recommendations, which would indicate the incidence of uncivilized language, in Elias' terms.

### **From staff renewal to promises of political transformation**

In recent years, the intensification of discourses marked by contempt for certain formalities in the political culture of Western democracies has represented a trend through which countless episodes involving radicalism have emerged. In Brazil, the pre-election polls for the 2018 presidential elections already pointed to the expressive ratings of candidate Jair Bolsonaro, a parliamentarian who gained notoriety through his "racist, homophobic, sexist"<sup>3</sup> comments and his sympathy for the period of the military dictatorship. A former military reservist, Bolsonaro has become a controversial figure due to his hate speech. In 2020, the period of analysis of this research, Bolsonaro, already President of the Republic, reaffirmed his positions, such as the attack on other powers and scientific negationism, in the form of truculent language.

Bolsonaro's election is part of a movement to renew the executive, guided by a rhetoric of reconstruction seasoned with nationalism and promises of purification. His speeches are blunt and predisposed to accusation. In official positions, the defense of an ethic substantially

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<sup>3</sup> The *Libération* article of 15 August 2018 reads as follows: "Jair Bolsonaro is now an outsider in the presidential election whose official campaign will open on Thursday. Racist, homophobic and sexist, this captain nostalgic for the dictatorship is taking advantage of the discredit weighing on the Brazilian political class." (our translation). Au Brésil, un ex-militaire pour liquider la démocratie. *Libération*, São Paulo, 15 de ago. de 2018. Available: [http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/08/15/au-bresil-un-ex-militaire-pour-liquider-la-democratie\\_1672816](http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/08/15/au-bresil-un-ex-militaire-pour-liquider-la-democratie_1672816). Access: 24 May 2021.

based on principles, a notion that Weber (1982) already warned was harmful to politics. In his classic lectures on science and politics, Weber warns that politicians make their decisions based on a series of conditions that are often far removed from personal judgments or preferences. Herein lies the key to the argument: if the commitment of science is to the truth and the commitment of politics is to the consequences of actions, to what extent is Bolsonaro's distancing himself from scientific recommendations and taking positions with dramatic results from the point of view of public health part of a language of incivility? Given this variable and the set of speeches made by the president throughout the pandemic, it is worth asking: how does the theory of civilizing processes relate to uncivilized language in moments of crisis, such as the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020?

### **The civilizing process and compliance with norms**

Norbert Elias' theory is geared towards a critique of sociological theories based on the image of the individual as an autonomous and self-sufficient being, but also towards its opposite, i.e. those that consider the social totality as a target for analysis that is independent of individual action. For the author, society is made up of a web of relationships inscribed within a historical process, considering the interdependent relationship between people. In this sense, the focus of his research is on unplanned long-term processes that point to transformations in the rules of social coexistence.

Elias' main work, *O Processo Civilizador* (The Civilizing Process), investigates a refinement in the norms of aggression based on a history of customs, taking as a reference the transformations in etiquette manuals and, consequently, in the rules of coexistence in society over the last five centuries. In the book, personality structures and their interdependent relationships are taken as sociological categories through which Elias traces the passages that go from aggression to the socially accepted model of behavior, taking the court society<sup>4</sup> as a parameter. Among the group of people with noble titles who circulated around the sovereign, the scenes of daily life were represented from a set of formalities followed liturgically and understood as ways of behaving closer to God, once close to the king. This is where the relationship between patterns of behavior and positions of power is established, according to Elias.

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth mentioning here the context of the 15th century, in which the Dukes of Burgundy, who wanted to ascend socially in the monarchical hierarchy, built absolutely exquisite ceremonials inspired by the Bible, with the representation of divine scenes in the world.



The civilizing process is a change in the pattern of conduct caused by mechanisms that are installed in the psychic apparatus, producing self-restraint of aggressive impulses. Accompanied by the feeling of preserving their position in the social network, the individual feels impelled to act according to this pattern, internalizing the norms and exercising self-control. This is a long-term march in a specific direction: the refinement of the norms of acting and feeling.

The civilizing process begins in small economies where roles are well defined and families produce enough to support themselves. At this point, the degree of interdependence is small, but with the specialization of production, the commitment to each other and to production itself increases. The specialization of work allows for exchange, made possible under the condition of commitment and regularity in what the individual cultivates, to the extent that competition demands ever stricter control. Elias explains that the growth in productivity is a fundamental factor in "raising standards of living", which at a very advanced stage culminates in the "formation of more stable monopolies of force", specifically the state, which also becomes the individual's guarantee of security (ELIAS, 2011, p. 256, our translation). This format takes on great proportions and starts to structure all of social life, always demanding greater rigor and establishing a standard of conduct that strives for discipline. Regular, disciplined behavior comes to be seen as a value, an asset that the subject must preserve within an economic structure. It goes through a process of long-term socialization that results in self-control of conduct. In the example of table behavior, Elias talks about the expansion and diffusion of levels of shame, the increase in the capacity to feel embarrassed in the face of certain manners.

This delicacy, this sensitivity, and a highly developed feeling of embarrassment, are, at first, characteristic aspects of small circles at court, and then of court society as a whole. (...) Together with a very specific social situation, feelings and emotions begin to be transformed in the upper class, and the structure of society as a whole allows the emotions thus modified to spread slowly through society. There is nothing to suggest that the affective condition, the degree of sensitivity, is changed by what we describe as "evidently rational", i.e. by a demonstrable understanding of given causal connections. (...) Firstly, over an extended period and in conjunction with a specific change in human relations, i.e. in society, the level of embarrassment is raised. The structure of people's emotions, sensitivity and behavior change, despite variations, in a very clear direction. Then, at a given moment, this conduct is recognized as hygienically correct (ELIAS, 1994, p.119, our translation).

According to Elias, there is a gradual movement of historical transformation towards a refinement in ways of behaving and expressing oneself, a tendency that can initially be observed in the upper classes, but which spreads throughout society. One of the ways in which it is possible to understand the individual's self-control is through the intertwining of psychogenesis and sociogenesis, which corresponds to a conjunction of micro and macro-sociological perspectives that must be thought of in a relational and dynamic way (WAIZBORT, 2001).

It was the European courts that created and established the standards of social behavior and their links to power and position in society. It was a mechanism for distinguishing between the noble and the rude in its origins, a grammar that today takes on its modern form in a set of protocols that commonly surround figures of public power. We need only consider the set of prerogatives recognized by law - including international law - with the aim of guaranteeing the full performance of the functions of heads of state. For this reason, it is common to see, in news coverage of international agreements, diplomatic missions and meetings of public interest, a set of formalities that includes everything from dress to security arrangements to soft and conciliatory speeches. These models of behavior appear to express the condition of rationality, courtesy and balance. They establish levels of constraint that are absorbed by the individual from childhood onwards, according to Elias.

Parents' constant worry about whether or not their children will conform to the standards of conduct of their class or of the upper class, whether they will maintain or increase the prestige of their families, whether they will defend their position within their own class - fears of this kind surround children from their earliest years (...) they play a considerable role in the control to which children are subjected from the outset, in the prohibitions imposed on them (ELIAS, 2011, p. 271, our translation).

The pressure exerted on the individual generates internal tensions and splits, an important aspect in Elias' model: the differences between classes aroused a sense of fear in the rising groups. These groups absorb the code of conduct of the upper classes and assimilate it, so that the superego is built on a sense of inferiority.

The point I would like to make is that controlling aggression is what gives stability to social interactions. In modern times, the domestication of aggression takes place from childhood, so that the more successful the civilizing process is, the less time is needed to prepare the child for adult functions (ELIAS, 1994). This is not about presenting normative guidelines as indications of what could be classified as good or bad behavior. Beyond the sphere of values, the effort is focused on identifying the mismatch between a dramatic moment for the population, due to the effects of the pandemic, and the disrespectful and unwelcoming tone of

the President of the Republic. In the context of the advance of the pandemic, the politician's tone of solidarity and responsibility for the consequences is more than mere normativity; from an analytical point of view, it defines political activity itself<sup>5</sup>.

### **Admitted aggressiveness and deadly incivility**

According to Elias, good manners and politeness are related to certain hierarchies and positions in society. When we observe incivility in today's politics, in the form of speeches and actions, we can identify the incidence of the relationship between power and degree of civility. Bernard Harcourt's article (2012) uses the theory of civilizing processes to think about how the language of incivility is linked to positions in power relations. The language of good custom, polite and non-aggressive, corresponds to an idea of civility as a standard of verbal acts that qualifies politics, a type of organization originally based on the notion of civil society. "The idea was promoted that it was good to be part of a political community, especially a political community marked by order, domestic peace and tranquility" (HARCOURT, 2012, p. 304, our translation). According to this record, the degree of civility of the representative would be proportional to the degrees of conformity with the moods of civil society, at least in theory.

However, the author talks about the emptying of this semantic link between politics and civility, because as political competitions intensify in the agonistic field, politics is summarized as the benefit of some to the detriment of others (HARCOURT, 2012). In the web of complex power struggles, in pluralistic environments, the results of political decisions are in fact not "civilized", since they produce dissatisfaction and frustration. So, if politics is not civilized, why should the language of politics be?

Iris Young (2014) pointed out the polarization in democracies through two imagined actors: a) participants in deliberative democracy, based on norms and processes of public deliberation, and b) activism, which, based on a model of citizen virtue, complains that deliberative processes are exclusionary. The separation between these two actors would increase structural inequalities, an arrangement in which the activist becomes the character of democracy who is sometimes "frustrated", "furious" with the injustices that deliberative democracy perpetuates or categorically denies, "rationalizing as if their decisions were beneficial" (YOUNG, 2014, p. 191, our translation). At this point, Young demarcates actors

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<sup>5</sup> In *Politics as a vocation*, Weber argues that mere passion is not enough, since politicians need two other qualities: responsibility and a sense of proportion. A firm control of the soul capable of distinguishing from the figure of the passionate (WEBER, 1982).



who are excluded from decision-making processes and who believe they are harmed by the decisions made by their representatives. Based on this arrangement, it is possible to assume that the reactions of those who feel wronged or excluded tend to be more uncivilized.

In a society that is plural and crossed by injustices, it is worth considering the constant situation of conflict that marks the political, to use the notion of Chantal Mouffe (2014). Inspired by Carl Schmitt's understanding of the political, this line considers the element of hostility to be central to the movement of disputes, an arrangement in which the relationship takes the form of friend-enemy<sup>6</sup>. In this sense, aggression would be considered a constituent of political struggles, insofar as it is part of endless struggles for rights.

From another angle and in view of the question proposed here, it is worth considering the specifics of the distinction between aggression and incivility. When Elias deals with the civilizing process, he considers a retraction of impulses, a self-control capable of curbing the psychic force that leads to action. Although the issue of the former President of the Republic's aggressiveness is important to the analysis of the situation, I will focus on the uncivilized attitude in the context of the pandemic. In common, aggression and incivility are characterized by the failure to observe or violation of social codes of conduct. However, incivility refers to a civic commitment - therein lies the mismatch between the head of state and the conduct prescribed by the office. This means that, although Bolsonaro has episodes of aggression in his career as a politician, the point to be analyzed is the discrepancy between his uncivilized stance during the Covid-19 pandemic and the public persona that officially represents national unity.

The incivility of the former President of the Republic lies in the denial of specific rules for the object that is intended to be observed: the scientific guidelines on measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus. At this point, the incivility goes beyond a set of formalities. Once the scientifically prescribed rule of conduct is denied, the immediate consequence is an increase in the number of people infected and killed by the virus. This is incivility because of the relationship between failure to comply with these formalities and the risk of threat to citizens' lives.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1974), Freud presents a dynamic through which the group dissolves individual identity insofar as it identifies its members

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<sup>6</sup> At this point, Mouffe criticizes Carl Schmitt's antagonistic friend-enemy relationship, insofar as he seeks a democratic politics in which the us-them relationship, that is, the conflicting parties, recognize that, although there is no rational solution to conflicts, the legitimacy of the opponents must be preserved. In democracy, the conflicting parties should be adversaries, not enemies, as he explains: "the adversarial model has to be considered constitutive of democracy because it allows democratic politics to transform antagonism into agonism" (MOUFFE, 2015, p. 19, our translation).

horizontally and the leader vertically. Dissolved in the group and with part of his individuality taken away, the member tends to be governed more by the decisions of the group or its leader and less by the criteria that characterize his individuality. "The individual abandons his ego ideal and replaces it with the ideal of the group, as embodied in the leader", explains Freud (1974). This relative exemption from responsibility, as a psychological fact of group behavior, is what can eventually release certain impulses in people who would not behave in the same way if they were alone. This is the basis for understanding the idea of incivility and its application when observing the stance of a head of state in the context of a pandemic: by discouraging the rules of social isolation and reducing the lethality of the disease, Bolsonaro has contributed to the rise in the number of people infected.

In this scenario, could Bolsonaro's scientific negationism and defense of his own convictions during the pandemic be indicative of uncivilized language? We will look at some of the ex-president's positions and then return to the hypothetical reverse effect on civilizing processes.

### **Bolsonaro's speeches about the pandemic**

Former President Jair Bolsonaro's first statement on the Covid-19 pandemic took place in Miami at an event on 9 March 2020, when Brazil was already registering the first cases of the disease. In his words, the power of the virus "was exaggerated"<sup>7</sup>. On that occasion, Bolsonaro told an audience of businesspeople that the coronavirus is like a "fantasy", days before more than 20 people from his entourage returned infected from the United States.

On 24 March 2020, the world followed the speed with which Italy reached 67,000 cases and the United States reached 50,000. At the time, Brazil had approximately 2,270 cases and 47 deaths, according to official data from the health departments<sup>8</sup>. That day, in his first national address after Covid-19 actually arrived in Brazil, the then President of the Republic opened his speech by presenting the joint action of the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs in the plan to rescue Brazilians in China. He then indicated a plan to combat the spread of the virus, led by the then Minister of Health Henrique Mandetta in sync with the health secretaries. He

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<sup>7</sup> Nos EUA, Bolsonaro diz a plateia de empresários que coronavírus 'não é isso tudo, muito é fantasia. O Globo, Rio de Janeiro, 10 de mar. de 2020. Available: <https://oglobo.globo.com/economia/nos-eua-bolsonaro-diz-plateia-de-empresarios-que-coronavirus-nao-isso-tudo-muito-fantasia-1-24296379>. Access: 16 Aug. 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Casos de coronavírus no Brasil em 24 de março. G1, Rio de Janeiro, 24 de mar. de 2020. Available: <https://g1.globo.com/bemestar/coronavirus/noticia/2020/03/24/casos-de-coronavirus-no-brasil-em-24-de-marco.ghtml>. Access: 24 May 2021.

suggested a kind of imbalance between the SUS's stated preparedness to care for the victims and the atmosphere of "panic" and "hysteria" created by the media. Below is an excerpt from the speech.

Much of the media went against the grain. They spread a sense of dread, with the main story being the announcement of a large number of victims in Italy, a country with a large number of elderly people and a totally different climate to ours. A perfect scenario, enhanced by the media, for a real hysteria to spread throughout our country (BOLSONARO. Official statement on national television. Brasília, 24 Mar. 2020, our translation).

Bolsonaro defended the continued normal operation of commercial activities in the name of preserving the "livelihood of families". He justified this by claiming that the risk was restricted to people over 60. And he warned that the population's concern should be focused on protecting "dear parents and grandparents", since people under 40 would not even show signs of the virus in the event of contamination.

In the course of his speech, the president illustrates his argument through a speculative example, "his particular case". He imagines himself contaminated by the virus and conjectures an experience free of major health concerns: "given my history as an athlete (...) I would not feel anything, or at most I would feel a little cold or flu" (our translation).

In his first pronouncement on the pandemic, the President of the Republic already presented Chloroquine<sup>9</sup> as a possible solution to combat the coronavirus, a hypothesis, according to Bolsonaro, that was in the process of being proven by the Albert Einstein Hospital and the Food and Drug Administration, the federal agency of the US Department of Health. This would start a series of defenses and recommendations of chloroquine as a solution to the disease by the president.

A few days later, Bolsonaro announced credit lines for companies and aid for the self-employed<sup>10</sup>. He emphasized the need to "keep jobs", warning that the economy is going hand in hand with the pandemic. In the following statement, already identified as one of the few heads of state who defended the resumption of economic activity, alongside Donald Trump, Bolsonaro took on the mission of "saving lives without leaving jobs behind". He justified

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<sup>9</sup> A drug mainly used in the treatment of malaria, occasionally recommended in the treatment of amoebiasis, rheumatoid arthritis and lupus erythematosus. In 2004, the Rega Institute for Scientific Research identified an inhibitory effect on the respiratory complications of SARS. In 2020, studies proved that chloroquine and its variant, hydroxychloroquine, are not effective in treating Covid-19 and cause other complications that worsen the patient's condition.

<sup>10</sup> Governo anuncia linha de crédito a pequenas e médias empresas. Agência Brasil, Brasília, 27 de mar. de 2020. Available: <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/politica/noticia/2020-03/ao-vivo-bolsonaro-faz-pronunciamento-sobre-combate-covid-19>. Access: 05 July 2021.

himself by showing "concern for the most vulnerable", duly explained: the "street vendor", the "peddler", the "barbecue seller", the "bricklayer's helper" and the "truck driver". At the time, he tried to reassure the population by defending the drug chloroquine: "the military chemical-pharmaceutical laboratories have entered in full force. And in 12 days, 1 million chloroquine tablets will be produced (...)"<sup>11</sup>.

Between public outings and physical contact in April and May, Bolsonaro greeted supporters and visited businesses, in opposition to isolation. He maintained almost daily communication through a fence where supporters gathered in numbers. It was also through this place that journalists asked questions about the plan to combat the coronavirus, from where Bolsonaro gave the following statement on 29 March:

This is a reality, the virus is there. We have to face it but face it like a fucking man. Not like a kid. Let's face the virus with reality. It's life. We will all die one day. Do we want to preserve lives? Yes. As far as the economy is concerned, Paulo Guedes is spending tens of billions of reais, which is from the budget, which is the people's money, although it's not even money. We got authorization from Congress to go over the ceiling, and that bill will be paid down the road (BOLSONARO, In: Após provocar aglomeração durante passeio em Brasília, Bolsonaro volta a se posicionar contra o isolamento social. G1, Brasília, 29 Mar. 2020, our translation).

Throughout the month of April, the population watched on TV the crowds caused by the ex-president during his public appearances, when he shook hands with supporters and often stopped wearing his face mask. By the end of April<sup>12</sup>, Brazil already had the highest contagion rate in the world, at which point the press recorded images of bagged bodies and lined-up graves. On Tuesday, 28 April, the day that Brazil overtook China in the number of deaths, the President of the Republic, when asked about the seriousness of the infected curve in the country, replied: "So what? What do you want me to do? I'm Messiah, but I don't work miracles!"<sup>13</sup>.

On Labor Day, when Brazil had 85,000 cases and 5,900 deaths, President Jair Bolsonaro declared: "I would like everyone to go back to work". He said, however, that this was no longer his decision, before suggesting the inefficiency of methods to contain the increase in the number of cases. "Governors and mayors who have taken very strict measures have not flattened the

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<sup>11</sup> Em pronunciamento na TV, Bolsonaro muda o tom e não critica o isolamento social. G1, Brasília, 31 de mar. de 2020. Available: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/03/31/em-pronunciamento-na-tv-bolsonaro-muda-o-tom-e-nao-critica-o-isolamento-social.ghtml>. Access: 19 Apr. 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Brasil tem a maior taxa de contágio do coronavírus do mundo. O Globo, Rio de Janeiro, 30 de abr. de 2020. Available: <https://oglobo.globo.com/sociedade/coronavirus/brasil-tem-maior-taxa-de-contagio-do-coronavirus-no-mundo-24403534>. Access: 06 Sept. 2021.

<sup>13</sup> "E daí? Eu sou Messias, mas não faço milagres". Isto É, São Paulo, 01 de mai. de 2020. Available: <https://istoe.com.br/e-dai-eu-sou-messiasmas-nao-faco-milagres/>. Access: 19 Apr. 2021.

curve," he said<sup>14</sup>. On 7 May 2020, President Jair Bolsonaro made a statement in which he highlighted his conversations with businessmen and industry representatives, justifying the importance of returning to normal activities<sup>15</sup>. And on 10 May, following a woman's question about the number of deaths in the country due to the pandemic, Jair Bolsonaro, in characteristic language, ordered the woman to "go demand it from your governor" (our translation)<sup>16</sup>.

In light of the events, documented by the national and international press, it is possible to list a series of positions by the President of the Republic in which Bolsonaro minimizes the importance of the pandemic and ignores the public health crisis. While in the first stage the president defended the use of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, when the public debate turned to advances in relation to the vaccine, Bolsonaro took a stand against it. He declared that no one is obliged to take the vaccine. In November, he celebrated the suspension of tests on Coronavac, from the Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinovac. At the time, he justified himself: "We will not buy from China. That is my decision". And when the tests were interrupted to investigate the relationship between the immunizer and the death of a volunteer who received it, Bolsonaro celebrated on his social networks: "Death, disability, anomaly. This is the vaccine that Doria (governor of São Paulo) wanted to force all São Paulo residents to take. The president said the vaccine could never be mandatory. Another one that Jair Bolsonaro wins" (our translation)<sup>17</sup>.

On 10 November, Bolsonaro again downplayed the seriousness of the crisis in explicitly sexist language. Referring to the pandemic, he said that Brazil "has to stop being a country of sissies" and "face the situation with an open heart"<sup>18</sup>. "Sissy", according to the Houaiss dictionary (2001), refers to "an individual of the male sex who behaves in a feminine manner". In another register, in the regionalist context, it points to a sense of "homosexuality" or "cowardice". In fact, "sissy" is a rude and prejudiced term, definitely incompatible with the

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<sup>14</sup> "Gostaria que todos voltassem a trabalhar". Folha de São Paulo, São Paulo, 01 de mai. de 2020. Available: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2020/05/gostaria-que-todos-voltassem-a-trabalhar-diz-bolsonaro-sobre-10-de-maio.shtml>. Access: 06 Sept. 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Leia a íntegra da live feita por Bolsonaro em 07 de maio. UOL, São Paulo, 07 de mai. de 2020. Available: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2020/05/07/veja-e-leia-na-integra-o-pronunciamento-de-jair-bolsonaro.htm>. Access: 05 July 2021.

<sup>16</sup> 'Cobre do seu governador': qual a responsabilidade do governo federal no combate à pandemia? BBC Brasil, São Paulo, 06 de jul. de 2020. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-53244465>. Access: 19 Apr. 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Bolsonaro comemora suspensão de testes da Coronavac. Deutsche Welle, São Paulo, 10 de nov. de 2020. Available: <https://www.dw.com/pt-br/bolsonaro-comemora-suspens%C3%A3o-de-testes-da-coronavac/a-55558007>. Access: 06 Sept. 2021.

<sup>18</sup> "Brasil tem de deixar de ser 'país de maricas' e enfrentar pandemia 'de peito aberto'", diz Bolsonaro. G1, Brasília, 10 de nov. de 2020. Available: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/11/10/bolsonaro-diz-que-brasil-tem-de-deixar-de-ser-pais-de-maricas-e-enfrentar-pandemia-de-peito-aberto.ghtml>. Access: 06 Sept. 2021.



composure and formal decency characteristic of a representative of Brazilians. It is doubly rude because, as well as referring to sexuality, it ignores the dramatic situation of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Decivilizing processes or uncivilized language?**

In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias analyses the links between rationalization, violence and civilization. Over the centuries, he explains how rationalization implies greater predictability and calculability, a trend that begins in court society, passes through the nobility, and gradually includes the bourgeoisie, then the masses, as well as other Western peoples (MANZO, 2013). Unlike Weber, Elias believes that the processes of rationalization are not irreversible and can include setbacks.

One of the difficulties in approaching the decivilizing processes in Elias' work lies in the main criticism of his work: if history unfolds through processes of rationalization that go from barbarism to civilization, how can we explain the barbarisms of the 20th century, particularly the Holocaust? It is on this terrain that Bauman (1998) launches his critique in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, referring to civilization as a myth. In this sense, how could the civilizing process explain the truculence and denial of what is rationally admitted, according to scientific research? However, a critical line opposed to this questioning recognizes in Elias a critical tone towards a certain European enthusiasm in relation to the march of civilization. Mennell (1992) proposes, for example, that an analysis of outbreaks of violence should focus on the question of decivilizing processes, as Elias considered their setbacks. In the same vein, Fletcher argues that the effort to apply the concept of decivilization in empirical research tends to broaden the understanding of patterns of behaviour capable of inspiring fear. Fletcher (1995) understands decivilization from an imbalance in self-restraint and relationship patterns, which would generate less stable and uniform feelings. These signs can become a dominant social process, in which social relations are characterized by fear (1995, p. 289).

In studies carried out with sociologist Eric Dunning (1992), on the self-restraint of violence in sports, and even in *The Germans* (1997), Elias reflects on the permanence of aggression in the 20th century. "The civilization to which I refer is never complete, and is always threatened", he warns (ELIAS, 1997, p. 161, our translation). It is worth noting that Elias's civilizing process lives in a tense equilibrium, so that nothing guarantees its permanence over time.

Decivilizing processes would keep moments of violence and aggression in the social fabric. Just as urinating and spitting were duly concealed in the scenes of everyday life by etiquette manuals, aggression and violence did not cease to exist, but were inhibited by a set of introjected social rules. In this sense, Elias goes on to say that "the pacification of a society is always at risk, whether due to personal conflicts or social conflicts" (1997, p. 163, our translation). However, on the scale of long-term historical processes, where would an analysis of the speech of the former President of the Republic, who is ultimately an individual, come in?

In fact, the President of the Republic is not just any individual, but the head of state. His figure represents the vocalization of the interests of part of the population, once elected in a majority vote. Coming from a military background, throughout his career as a politician Bolsonaro has given up a certain modesty in his behavior in favor of forcefulness in his speech. The lack of civility in his behavior converges with his well-known tone of accusations, offenses and negationism. In relation to the pandemic, it is possible to say that the lack of decorum and respect in his speeches converges in the sense of releasing the impulses of aggression, according to the reversal of civilizing processes identified by Elias.

On the other hand, the caution in referring to the object analyzed as *the language of incivility* is justified: we chose to use this term since Elias' assumption would be the starting point for an analysis of presidential content during the pandemic. In this work, Bolsonaro's pronouncements during the pandemic appear as a vanishing point from which lines of projection are able to provide a broader picture of the scenario, namely that of incivility in society. As an analytical key, the thought of Norbert Elias is taken as a "toolbox", to take Gilles Deleuze's words as a reference (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 71, our translation). Theory "must work", or be activated in its enabling potential, in the terms of Ann Swidler (1986). Considering social practices in their dynamic of continuous re-significations, which intertwines discourses with beliefs and actions that lead to social transformations (FAIRCLOUGH, 2016; VAN DIJK, 2012), it is possible to verify the incidence of the language of incivility in Bolsonaro's speeches throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

Based on Elias' work, it is possible to think of the hypothesis not of a return of aggression, but of a redistribution of tensions based on the non-recognition of certain fundamental parameters for the preservation of life, namely sanitary recommendations. Elias may never have considered decivilizing processes as a return, but as a prevalence of the "hidden side" of civilization, perhaps the side that tends to reappear in moments of crisis, such as a pandemic. It is from this point that the analysis of Bolsonaro's speeches, particularly his

criticism of health standards, opens to the hypothesis of uncivilized language expressed through his scientific denialism.

### **Final considerations**

Given the data collected, I made an analytical effort to organize the ex-president's speeches, based on his opposition to health standards, defended by epidemiologists, doctors and based on science. In this scheme, we have a cross-section of a set of speeches and records of Jair Bolsonaro's actions, which allows us to see how much these positions can be thought of from the point of view of incivility.

The ex-president's stance revolved around four axes throughout the pandemic: 1) reduction: "fantasy", "hysteria", "little flu"; 2) prioritization: "concern for the economy", "credit lines", "financial aid"; 3) sexist ridicule: "face the virus like a man, not like a kid", "stop being a country of sissies" and; 4) lack of responsibility: "ask your governor", "I don't work miracles". In this respect, there is a mismatch between their positions and the understanding of the politician's activity according to Weber: "it is the decisive psychological quality of the politician: his ability to let realities act on him with intimate concentration and calm" (WEBER, 1982, p. 138, our translation).

The four records tend to create an opposition in their speeches. In the logic of Bolsonaro's speeches, the pandemic is reduced in relation to: 1) degree: mildness vs. severity 2) efforts: economy vs. public health; 3) strength: man vs. sissies and brats and 4) responsibility: president vs. governors. These oppositions inspired public debates across the country throughout 2020, establishing oppositions whose result was to deflate the seriousness of the pandemic. Beyond a formalist conception of discourse and a transdisciplinary perspective (VAN DIJK, 2012), the balance of these negationist presidential statements, in practice, was observed by non-compliance with the health rules of isolation and denial of the vaccine, which aggravated the public health situation in the country.

Based on the data collected in a survey of his main public speeches over the last ten months, it is possible to say that the former President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro, is denying the reality of the pandemic that is taking hold in the country and around the world. In doing so, he is failing to fulfill his responsibilities as head of state, which tends to cause incalculable damage from the point of view of combating the pandemic. The balance of his disregard for

health regulations can be seen in the increase in the contagion curve and its consequences, in terms of lives lost.

Like Weber, Elias understands Western rationalism as the rationalism of controlling emotions and aggressive impulses. In this process, the most primal human feelings, such as passions, convictions and personal vanities, give way to disciplined behavior based on rationality. When President Jair Bolsonaro flouts the codes of conduct enshrined in sanitary measures to contain the pandemic, he strains the limits of what Elias understood as civilized. And when he confronts the parameters of scientific rationality in the name of his own convictions during a pandemic, he tends to produce dramatic consequences from the point of view of contamination.

In 2021, it is possible to conclude that the incivility in Brazilian politics was due to the president's refusal to recognize the scale of the citizens' drama. Contrary to WHO recommendations and medical-scientific opinions, Bolsonaro did more than reduce the importance of the pandemic: as a leader, he encouraged people to break social isolation, increasing the risk of contamination. He released statements in mocking and provocative language, in a clear lack of sensitivity, even respect, for what was happening to his citizens. Therefore, the lack of decorum in his speeches converges in the sense of unleashing impulses of incivility, contrary to compliance with certain fundamental norms to contain the contagion curve, which indicates an inversion of the civilizing senses, expressed in the figure of a politician fundamentally guided by personal convictions and his own vanity.

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