COULD THE INTERNET PROMISE HONORS TO A NEW PRINCE? DONALD TRUMP AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN UNITED STATES[1]

A INTERNET PODERIA PROMETER HONRAS A UM PRÍNCIPE NOVO? DONALD TRUMP E A PANDEMIA DE COVID-19 NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

¿PODRÍA INTERNET PROMETER HONORES A UN NUEVO PRÍNCIPE? DONALD TRUMP Y LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19 EN LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

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ABSTRACT: In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared Pandemic status due to the spread of the new Coronavirus Sars-Cov-2, which causes the Covid-19 disease. The responses from each state was different, and in the United States, Donald Trump chose to follow the characteristics that elected him, such as denial and the dissemination of Fake News on the internet, impacting the population's attitudes and taking the country to a high number of deaths from the disease. In this paper we will briefly analyze Trump's election and his government's management of the pandemic, making use of Machiavelli's concepts of virtù and fortune to weave our analyses.

KEYWORDS: Donald Trump. Pandemic. Fake news. Internet.

RESUMO: Em março de 2020 a Organização Mundial da Saúde decretou o estado de Pandemia pela disseminação do novo Coronavírus Sars-Cov-2, causador da doença Covid-19. As respostas de cada Estado foram diferentes, sendo que nos Estados Unidos, Donald Trump optou por seguir as características que o elegeram, como o negacionismo e a divulgação de Fake News pela internet, impactando nas atitudes da população e levando o país a um elevado número de mortos pela doença. Nesse artigo analisaremos brevemente a eleição de Trump e a gestão da pandemia por seu governo, lançando mão dos conceitos de virtù e fortuna de Maquiavel para tecer nossas análises.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Donald Trump. Pandemia. Fake news. Internet.

RESUMEN: Em marzo de 2020, la Organización Mundial de la Salud declaró el estado de pandemia debido a la propagación del nuevo coronavirus Sars-Cov-2, que causa la enfermedad Covid-19. Las respuestas de cada estado fueron diferentes, y em Estados Unidos,

Donald Trump optó por seguir las características que lo eligieron, como la negación y la difusión de Fake News em internet, impactando las actitudes de la población y llevando al país a un numero elevado de muertos por la enfermedad. Em este artículo analizaremos brevemente la elección de Trump y la gestión de la pandemia por parte de su gobierno, haciendo uso de los conceptos de virtude y fortuna de Maquiavel para tejer nuestras análisis.

PALABRAS CLAVE*: Donald Trump. Pandemia. Fake news. Internet.*

Introduction

In December 2019, in the Chinese city of Wuhan, the first cases of Covid-19, a disease caused by a new type of Coronavirus, Sars-Cov-2, were discovered. With the international circulation, in a short time other countries also reported cases of the disease, and on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a State of Pandemic. This event had repercussions at the political-ideological level in several ways, and directly impacted political institutions around the world, together with the other consequences of the transmission of the virus and its disease.

The context in which the countries faced the emergence of the pandemic was not politically or economically stable. Given the high rate of infection of the virus, the imminence of an unprecedented global crisis in contemporary times has put the entire political system in check, but especially the response capacity of states and governments in force to this systemic threat (JARMAN, 2021). Therefore, the entire existing conjuncture is impacted and the pre-existing crisis even works as a catalyst for the new one to expand.

One of the most important aspects of the conjuncture and a key piece of denialism, the global trend toward high circulation of *Fake News* creates a "gray zone" in objectively defining events, and creates an environment of imprecision that is conducive to the relativization of facts. On the phenomenon of *Fake News* in the political arena, Lee writes:

> In democracies, [the phenomenon] "fake news" has developed in current political climates, producing misinformation on social media platforms. This has served to diminish the credibility of conventional news networks, dividing the general public, ideologically and in mere acceptance of the fact, by providing credence to ideological "fake news" claims. Only recently debated, [the phenomenon of] "fake news" has been a component of political strategies since the beginning of modern political practice (LEE, 2019, p. 16, our translation).

The shock caused by Fake News is notable especially in the United States, a country that hosted the first electoral election permeated by fake news highly reproduced on social

media, which eventually elected the Republican Donald Trump. The first "Twitter president" (BRUNELLO, 2019) was invariably problematic throughout his term of office, which began in 2016, and is recognized for the high dose of dissimulation and lying in his pronouncements. According to a Washington Post survey published by Kessler, Rizzo and Kelly (2018), Trump makes about 7.6 false statements per day, which resonate massively among the American people, especially among his voters.

The culture of *Fake News*, coupled with his controversial personality, has relevant force in the power exercised by the U.S. president during the pandemic period, and are decisive factors in the consequences of his political decisions to face this reality and to maintain power. Given this, an analysis of Donald Trump's political conduct becomes pertinent, focusing on his government during the pandemic period and before the election.

To this end, we will draw on Nicolaus Machiavelli's classic concepts of virtù and fortune. Thus, this article, composed of three more parts, will go through the political trajectory of Donald Trump's management of the pandemic. In the following part, we will deal with the concepts elaborated by the philosopher and the political trajectory of Donald Trump. In the later part we will briefly address the management of the pandemic in the United States. Finally, we will make some final considerations about the above.

Trump election and government

Machiavelli considers that a virtuous prince is one who, among other things, values stability in his relationship with those around him. The author deals with how one must relate to mercenaries, secretaries, and sycophants; however, the protagonist of this sought-after "stability" is the people. Thus, we can get a sense of what the author is about when he talks about virtù. Fortune, on the other hand, is explained by the comparison with a torrential river, because, "when they fill and overflow, [...] everything yields to its violence, without being able to oppose it" (MAQUIAVEL, 2018, p. 133, our translation). In a reflection on free will, there is little left to individual choice; it is dominated by chance. More than that, fortune is "the driving force of the cyclical movement of history [...], the builder and destroyer of particular forms of power" (BIGNOTTO, 1991).

Therefore, political activity in Machiavelli has a certain focus on the prince's ability to use both, as well as the relationship with the dominated people, since this is the greatest force capable of overthrowing a prince from the government. Nowadays and in the context of American democracy, it is also worth thinking about the means that lead someone to the

position of ruler. Moreover, politics in Machiavelli is unrelated to ethics (as long as there is no corruption, according to him); the focus is only on maintaining power. Thus, it becomes pertinent to think of ways for this relationship to be built and stable.

The rise of Donald Trump, a controversial personality from outside institutional politics, to the presidency of the United States, a country whose political foundation tends toward traditionalism, is the object of study of many intellectuals. About this issue, Mark Lilla, in his book *The Progressive of Yesterday and Tomorrow* (2018), seeks to analyze why Trump won over his electorate. The author argues that what brought the United States to the election of Trump was the inability of progressives to build political unity, with a focus on what unites citizens in a nation, rather than what separates them.

One of the justifications given by Lilla (2018) for the strong popular support won by Donald Trump is the appeal to discrimination against political minorities. The author points out that identity politics (which he calls identity liberalism) is a problem for political activity because it does not provoke the "buy-in" of the white working class and does not bring an imaginary of collective solidarity, along with the vision of a nation with citizens together. In short, the author argues that American Democrats refuse to arouse a sense of identification, because they bring well-structured proposals, but do not build an imaginary of what they want to create; something that Republicans and the far right have done, with demagoguery, and which provokes adherence from this "abandoned" white working class in progressive discourses.

Thus, to bring Lilla's arguments succinctly, the collective imaginary that leads to Trump's election consists, among other things, of a lack of collective identification and political activity guided by individualism. To describe what he calls the Reagan Dispensation (the collective imaginary in question), he exposes:

> I- The good life is the life of autonomous individuals - individuals grounded perhaps in families, churches, and small communities, but not citizens of a republic with common goals and obligations to each other; II- Priority should be given to accumulating - rather than distributing - wealth, which allows individuals and families to maintain their independence and prosper; III- The freer the markets are, the more they grow and enrich everyone; IV- Government, to quote Reagan, "is the problem. Not the tyrannical government, not the inefficient government, not the unfair government. But the government itself (LILLA, 2018, p. 29, our translation).

In the surroundings of the same facts and with an analysis in the scope of institutional politics, Levitsky and Ziblatt in *How Democracies Die* (2018) discuss the factors that were determinant for Trump, an *outsider, to* assume the highest office in US politics.

According to the authors, Trump's rise was made possible by a crisis within the parties, which had until then contained, through the Electoral College, the election of demagogues and extremists as popular as the candidate elected in 2016. However, in addition to this, other factors were decisive for Trump's victory: the explosion of alternative media, the high screen time due to the controversial speeches of the then candidate (generating free electoral propaganda) and the external financing of the campaign (LEVITSKY; ZIBLATT, 2018). Allied to these factors, the internet and social media also played a crucial role in Trump's campaign.

The construction of the demagogic relationship between Trump and his electorate took place mainly through the social networks. Even before he was officially the GOP candidate for the presidency, the popularity of his possible candidacy was so evident that an internal party decision would be unable to contain it without consequences. In an interview with journalist Bob Woodward (2020, our translation), Trump says:

> Without social media, first of all, I wouldn't have won, and second of all, you know, I'm on Facebook first. Zuckerberg," the CEO of Facebook, "came to the White House two weeks ago." (...) "He said, congratulations, you're number one on Facebook." (...) "And I'm number one on Twitter," Trump said. "When you're number one and when you have hundreds of millions of people, even if they're against you or not, they still read what you say. I don't need commercials. When you're number one, you don't need commercials.

Thus, one can see that there was the construction of a complex relationship between Donald Trump and his electorate, based on the populist discourse and on the appearances he cultivated, added to a pre-existing institutional conjuncture. What made the Republican's election possible, as he himself acknowledges, were the social networks.

The internet, initially created as a means of communication between computers in a closed network for military purposes, initially called Arpanet and later extended to personal computers in civil society, has developed in such a way that today we can not only communicate but also shop, read news and even produce content, given the horizontality that the internet provides between users, unlike traditional means of communication such as radio or TV. Andrew Keen, an entrepreneur from Silicon Valley (a region in the state of California in the United States with a large concentration of technology companies), points to the importance of the Internet in our current lives: "First we lived in villages, then in cities; now we live increasingly online" (KEEN, 2012, p. 50, our translation).

Political activity takes on a new environment in the 21st century. The role of the Internet is preponderant in the rise of the so-called New Right, to the extent that this is its

main way of interaction with the electorate (STURARI, 2020, p. 61), by using strategies and mechanisms such as *Fake News* and *Big Data*. As the biggest reference of this logic, Donald Trump's (successful) campaign for the presidency of the United States in 2016 makes this evident. The Republican was elected thanks to the skill in communicating with his audience on social networks, in which the importance of the concreteness of the facts took a back seat.

Trump's campaign demonstrates the use of post-truth and justifies, along with BREXIT[4], it being chosen the Oxford Dictionary's 2016 word of the year. The priority in Trump's campaign was the appeal to the passions of the American people, constituting a strong populist character under the slogan *"Make America Great Again"*. About this, in a report for El País, Bassets stated at the time of the election:

> His merit consisted in understanding the discomfort of Americans who were victims of the storm of globalization, the middle classes who have not ceased to lose purchasing power in recent decades, those who saw how the Great Recession paralyzed social ascension, those who watch in bewilderment the demographic and social changes in a country whose political and economic elites ignore them. Working-class whites-a formerly Democratic minority that competes with other minorities such as Latinos and blacks, but does not have a victim social status-found in Trump their providential man. Also the racist current that exists in the country of slavery and segregation has found in Trump a tailor-made leader (BASSETS, 2016, our translation).

Since the 2016 election, the *Hybrid Warfare* strategy of psychologically manipulating to instill chaos for political purposes and legitimize authoritarianism has been the main approach to communication between the president and Americans. This is how Trump spreads his populism; it is not only a constant factor of the mandate, but the sustenance of it. Kakutani (2018, p. 12, our translation) demonstrates this strategy by stating that about Trump's uses of post-truth and *Fake News:*

> His lies [...] are only the most scathing among the many warning signs about his attacks on democratic institutions and current norms. He routinely attacks the press, the justice system, the intelligence agencies, the electoral system, and the public servants responsible for the proper functioning of the American government.

In 2018, renowned American journalist Bob Woodward released a book about Donald Trump's first years in office. This book is titled *Fear*. However, the fear caused by the president and reported by Woodward is not the fear advocated by Machiavelli. The Florentine dealt with a fear derived from a force of authority of the prince, which was a consequence of

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[4] Referendum marking the UK's exit from the European Union

the "dread of punishment" (MAQUIAVEL, 2018, p. 92, our translation), which would prevent a possible insurrection of the people or enemies. On the other hand, the fear caused by the American president is not derived from this force of authority, but from the insecurity generated by the way of governing. This fear does not even defend him from oppositions, but causes them, because he is temperamental, emotionally unstable, and impulsive.

All this is potentiated in the scenario of public health chaos caused by the pandemic. In this way, Trump goes against one of the main foundations of Machiavellian theory: "the prince must inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he will avoid hate" (MAQUIAVEL, 2018, p. 93, our translation).

> I cause anger. I really do cause anger. I always have. I don't know if this is an advantage or a disadvantage, but whatever it is, I do. (...) I had many situations like that, where people hated me more than any human being they had ever met (WOODWARD, 2020, p. 6, our translation).

This line by Trump, from a 2016 interview, gives its name to Bob Woodward's second book about the Republican's tenure, *Rage,* in which he addresses the president's administration in 2020, with a focus on the Covid-19 pandemic.

Trump may be considered a hated ruler. However, he stays in power because he is proportionally loved by a specific and broad sector of American society: the white, male middle class, which finds itself in ufanistic speeches about saving the traditional American homeland from a potential destruction that would have been promoted by minorities.

The president's acceptance, however, is less related to his governing faculty, and more to his good use of his own image at this particular political juncture. He himself acknowledged his flawed populism, when he revealed, in his words, "not feeling the love" (CONRAD, 2020). What promotes his acceptance, even if partial, is the occasion of the internet, *Fake News* and post-truth.

Machiavelli recommends that the prince should possess certain qualities, but if he does not, he must at least appear to possess them. The virtual scenario is the ideal environment for this. Therefore, it can be said that the Internet, by enhancing appearances, does the same to the positive reputation of the prince, or the president in our analysis.

About this issue, Sturari (2020) brings some points proposed by the philosopher ByungChul Han, who talks about what he calls the transparency society, in a book so entitled.

> For the author, things start to have value for what can be seen, that is, the visual appeal is very strong. (...) Another aspect pointed out by Han (op. cit.) is the loss of intimacy: with high publicity, a tyranny is created that

> psychologizes and personalizes everything, crossing even the political environment; then, **politicians are judged not by their actions, but by what they stage to do** (STURARI, 2020, p. 54-55, our emphasis, our translation).

Kakutani (2018, p. 15-16, our translation) points out, on this issue still and already foreshadowing the management of the pandemic through the attitudes of the president that

> With Trump, the personal sphere is political, and in many ways he is less a cartoonish anomaly and more a bizarre epitome of a series of broader, interconnected attitudes that slowly erode truth these days, from the mixing of news and politics with entertainment to the toxic polarization that has taken over American politics to the growing populist contempt for expert knowledge.

Donald Trump used this to his advantage to try to maintain his acceptance in the midst of the pandemic. In one of the 18 interviews he gave Woodward, which were published in the book *Rage*, Trump already showed some awareness of the dangers of the occasion. This awareness, however, was not what he expressed publicly; quite the opposite.

Trump and the management of the pandemic

According to one of Woodward's interviews, on January 28, 2020 Trump would have already been warned about the imminent danger of the virus by his National Security Advisor, Robert O'Brien, who alerted him by saying that the virus would be "the greatest threat to national security." In another interview on May 6, Trump claimed he did not remember being warned; until then, he continued to claim to the public that he had controlled the situation by having restricted international traffic with China (GANGEL; HERB; STUART, 2020).

In several situations, the president tried to demonstrate security in his measures against the crisis. He tried, in all his official pronouncements about the pandemic, to attenuate the evidence of the virus' seriousness, publicly stating that it was like a common flu. Moreover, he attributed its cure, as well as prevention, to substances that have no scientific proof of such effects.

Hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin were treated by Trump as if they were miracles in curing and preventing Covid-19, a trend that was reused by Bolsonaro in Brazil. Trump's path to endorsing these substances is described by Bump (2020), in a Washington Post story, and is permeated by post-veridical data (such as a possible support from Stanford University, later publicly denied by it) and doctors acting according to personal interests, being constantly contradicted by scientific publications. On *Twitter*, on May 11, Trump writes:

"*HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE & AZITHROMYCIN, taken together, have a real chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine.*

Another problematic recommendation from the president was the use of oral disinfectant to prevent the disease, which led news portals to launch a campaign for citizens not to take disinfectant. This even led to his main opponent in the 2020 election, Joe Biden, speaking out saying, "I can't believe I have to say this, but please don't drink bleach" (GUIMÓN, 2020).

All this can be interpreted as an attempt by Trump to maintain an appearance of good and effective management of the pandemic, thus generating greater approval from his electorate. The effort to do this is so great that, in one of his videos in the 2020 election campaign, he uses a statement made by infectologist Anthony Fauci, the government's chief scientist, in a manipulated way, which was denounced by the doctor himself. According to a report aired on October 12 on Globo News, the video implies that Fauci was praising the measures taken by Trump in dealing with the Coronavirus crisis, when, in fact, the statement was about the work done by the White House health team.

Although he has always downplayed the effects of the pandemic and overestimated his competence to deal with it, in an interview with Bob Woodward on February 7, before most of these pronouncements, this is how he referred to the disease:

> It is airborne. It is always more complicated than touch. You don't have to touch things. Right? But the air, you just breathe the air and that's how it goes on. And so this is a treacherous [disease]. Very delicate. And it's also more deadly than your most debilitating flu (GANGEL; HERB; STUART, 2020, our translation).

When confronted about the ambivalence of these positions, Trump positioned himself as follows in another interview with Woodward, on March 19, in a recording released to CNN: "Well, I think, Bob, really, to be honest with you-I've always wanted to minimize its [the pandemic's] importance. I still like to minimize it because I don't want to create panic" (GANGEL; HERB; STUART, 2020).

The president of the United States, in this sense, acts cherishing appearances, but not exactly in the way that benefits him, as Machiavelli recommends in *The Prince*. According to him, the prince should appear "pious, faithful, humane, religious, [and] upright" (MAQUIAVEL, 2018, p. 97, our translation); which, inferring from the analysis made earlier, is not exactly how Donald Trump behaves. Moreover, the president appears to have been

more godly in the aspects he tried to hide, and were revealed in his interviews with Bob Woodward, than in what he chose to show in official pronouncements.

Final considerations

Machiavelli established precepts about how the Prince should behave and what qualities he should have. Bringing these precepts to the present day, we can analyze the performance of the U.S. president since his election in 2016 until the management of the pandemic and the pre-election period of 2020. For this, we brought the concepts of virtù and fortune of the Florentine philosopher.

Perhaps few if any political analysts would consider Trump a virtuous politician. He represents a new populist right wing that has achieved global victories, such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Narendra Modi in India, Marine Le Pen in France (who despite not winning the elections she contested received considerable amounts of votes), Bolsonaro in Brazil etc.

Trump found fortune in his favor by embarking on the conservative wave growing in the world and succeeded in the election through the use of the internet and social media, even if by contested means Kaiser (2019), points out how Trump's campaign advisor, Steve Bannon, made use of mechanisms made available by Cambridge Analytica to manipulate voters through data made available on the *Facebook* platform. There was also an investigation into Trump's possible connection with Russia, which could have influenced the US election).

However, the fortune that benefited Trump did not last long, giving way to another, the pandemic, which brought threats to his stability. The United States, a wealthy country with an elaborate health care system, found itself failed in the management of the pandemic by the president, who downplayed the disease and was negative about the data that science was presenting about the virus and its consequences (SINGER *et al.,* 2021). This failure in the management of the pandemic probably cost him his re-election, even under the accusations of fraud that he wove to try to stay in office, which still has much to be studied and analyzed.

The controversies in his government were many and are ample field of study and analysis, many possibilities open. However, within what we have analyzed here, we can conclude that, under the precepts of virtù and fortune, the president was not an example of the former, and the latter presented itself positively to him briefly, like a passing breeze.

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