



Article

Populism, Twitter, and COVID-19: Narrative, Fantasies, and Desires

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Abstract: During a global pandemic, the great impact of populist discourse on the construction of social reality is undeniable. This study analyzes the fantasmatic dimension of political discourse from Donald Trump's and Jair Bolsonaro's Twitter accounts between 1 March and 31 May. To do so, it applies a Clause-Based Semantic Text Analysis (CBSTA) methodology that categorizes speech in Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) triplets. The study findings show that in spite of the Coronavirus pandemic, the main beatific and horrific subjects remain the core populist signifiers: the people and the elite. While Bolsonaro's narrative was predominantly beatific, centered on the government, Trump's was mostly horrific, centered on the elite. Trump signified the pandemic as a subject and an enemy to be defeated, whereas Bolsonaro portrayed it as a circumstance. Finally, both leaders defined the people as working people, therefore their concerns about the pandemic were focused on the people's ability to work.

Keywords: political discourse; populism; COVID-19; Trump; Bolsonaro



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1. Introduction

In the midst of a global pandemic, it is particularly important to see how political discourses interpret and represent reality. Previous studies have already retrieved two mainframes in the political representation of the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) a global threat or (2) a minor issue (Greer et al. 2020). These opposing representations have had a direct impact on public policy and governmental response: national governments that saw the COVID-19 pandemic as a global threat (e.g., South Korea, New Zealand) applied measures such as social distancing, lockdowns, substantial testing, contact tracing, mandatory face masks, among others; governments with negationist approaches such as the United States and Brazil governments openly criticized lockdowns and mask wearing, and did not allocate significant resources to substantial testing, and encouraged their citizens to continue with their normal lives (Greer et al. 2020).

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to display the narrative construction of COVID-19 in Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump's discourses.

Both politicians have several things in common: right-wing populist-nationalism, Christian worldviews, and a perfect political persona for the age of social media (d'Ancona 2019; Di Carlo and Kamradt 2018; Enli 2017; Llanada in Gonzalez 2016; Ortellado and Riberio 2018). Both surprisingly won their countries' presidential elections by exploiting social rage and discomfort towards the political establishment with a strong and emotionally captivating discourse (Bobo 2017; Cioccarri and Persichetti 2018; Costa et al. 2019; Di Carlo and Kamradt 2018; Judis 2017; Smith and Hanley 2018; Casero-Ripollés 2021).

Acknowledging both the importance of emotions in populist discourse (Cervi 2020b; Cervi and Carrillo-Andrade 2019), and the downplay of the affective dimension of political

mobilization (Glynos 2011) by traditional approaches, this paper, following Glynos and Stavrakakis (2008), adopts and focuses on the Lacanian concept of fantasy. The concept of fantasy helps to disclose how emotions capitalize on the affective energy in a network of signifiers (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008).

Thus, by recognizing the “elective affinity” (Gerbaudo 2018) between populism and social networks, the study analyzes Trump’s and Bolsonaro’s Twitter discourses during the first three months of the pandemic (1 March to 30 May), to display how the pandemic itself was framed an actor and how fantasy molded the narrative around it.

Populism

In order to analyze Trump and Bolsonaro’s discourses, it necessary to first highlight the main characteristics of populism and populist discourse.

Due to the diversity of the phenomenon, defining populism is not an easy task (Cervi 2020a). Probably the most widely accepted definition is the one that considers populism to be a thin-centered ideology (Mudde 2004, 2013) that splits society in two homogenous and antagonistic groups, defined as the pure people against the corrupted elite, and argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. Populism is seen as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde 2004) due to its lack of complexity and consistency compared to other belief systems. For that reason, populism can be combined with very different ideologies, such as nationalism, socialism, and communism.

In this vein, populism can be understood, and thus studied, as the discursive manifestation of a thin-centered ideology that is not only focused on an underlying “set of basic assumptions about the world”, but on “the language that unwittingly expresses them” (De Vreese et al. 2018).

The idea of the “people” is at the center of populism: people form a community, a place where they feel safe and where there is mutual trust, a place where it is clear who is “one of us and who is not” (Cervi 2020b).

Therefore, *the people* are ruled and governed by “non-political” views because there is no need for them: social values and practices are ruled by common sense, as Stavaert once put it, by “the wisdom of the people” (Clark 2009).

The definition of the *élite* can also vary—although it usually includes politics, media, financial, judicial, and intellectual *élites* accused of being incompetent and selfish—yet the central claim that a group of *élites* are oppressing the people and seeking to undermine their rights and voice, does not change.

In this sense, as stressed by Mudde (2004), “the silent majority”, whose—according to this narrative—legitimate power has been taken away by the “bad elite” (in other words, they feel socio-political discontent) need a leader who knows how to return power to the people. Populist leaders, therefore, display a sort of double-identity (Cervi 2020a): on the one hand they can understand average citizens’ needs and concerns because they are part of the people, they are “one of us”; on the other they display exceptional Messianic characteristics since they are the only ones able to return the (legitimate) power to the people.

Populism and social networks

Social networks have been widely recognized as one of the keys to the current success of populism (Cervi 2020a; Casero-Ripollés 2018), to the extent that the relationship between social media and populism has been defined as an “elective affinity” (Gerbaudo 2018).

Social media disintermediation, in particular, helps populists to circumvent hostile journalistic gatekeeping (Groshek and Engelbert 2013), whilst at the same time representing an ideal “discursive opportunity” (Koopmans and Statham 2010) to frame mainstream media as part of the corrupted “elite”. Furthermore, social media’s attention economy which brings forward simple content (Klinger and Svensson 2016) and emotional communication (Papacharissi 2015), runs counter to the key traits of establishment politics, such as formality and moderation (Gerbaudo 2018), perfectly matching populists’ discursive dynamics, which emphasize emotional elements (Hopster 2021) and a simplified dichotomous vision of the world (Cervi 2020b).

Donald Trump, in this regard, transformed Twitter into the preferred *locus* of his political narrative (Clarke and Grieve 2019; Elayan et al. 2020; Kreis 2017; Tasente 2020; Yaqub et al. 2017).

Likewise, in the case of Bolsonaro, many studies have shown (da Silva 2020; Fadanelli et al. 2020; Teixeira et al. 2019) how his communicative style perfectly matched Twitter's digital structure.

The fantasmatic: the realm of political desire

Traditional approaches to political discourse and ideology have downplayed the affective dimension of humanity, explaining political mobilization only in terms of interest-based rationalities and classic sociological categories (Glynos 2011; Casero-Ripollés et al. 2021).

As Norris and Inglehart (2016) have summarized, at the heart of the populist rhetoric is the promise of relief and redemption from anxieties and fears arising from contemporary events, therefore emotions cannot be left outside social science's interpretative framework.

In particular, all these processes take a narrative form. Narratives can be seen as sense-making devices that allow conceptions of stable selfhood to be projected, or even protected, across time and space (Eberle 2017).

Glynos (2008) connected narrative with fantasy and has argued that it can be understood not as a veil of "false consciousness", but rather as a filter that reduces anxiety by showing subjects "their place" in the world and providing them with the "security of being".

According to Glynos (2008, p. 283) fantasy has "a narrative structure involving some reference to an idealized scenario promising an imaginary fullness or wholeness (the beatific side of fantasy) and, by implication, a disaster scenario (the horrific side of fantasy)".

Thus, fantasy can be understood as a mediator in the subject's relation to norms and ideals that rule social and political practices (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008). It thereby connects the "dry" socio-symbolic field (its official insignia) to the "sticky" affective dimension of the subject (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008). In sum, fantasy combines the key role that the symbolic and the affective play in social and political life (Glynos 2011).

The fantasmatic dimension is therefore the locus of affective energy (Salter 2016). From this theoretical stance, emotions are not only subjective or psychological, but socio-cultural practices that move bodies and stick to them (Ahmend in McMillan 2017). Fantasmatic logics are about the promise of (an always already lost) enjoyment involved in sociopolitical values and practices: the primary function of fantasy is to offer up a return to enjoyment whilst at the same time maintaining a distance from the structural impossibility of it (McMillan 2017).

According to the Lacanian approach to social analysis, the lack of the socio-symbolic is an instantiation of the lack of the ontological that defines individual subjectivity (Glynos 2001; McMillan 2017). In other words, social contingency exists due to the individual subjectivity which is inherently lacking. This symbolic disruption paradoxically explains the stability and instability of socio-political practices because it structures the enjoyment (*jouissance*) that sustains them. The imagined promise of the fullness-to-come is what makes discursive constructions and narratives robust (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008; McMillan 2017).

Glynos and Stavrakakis (2008) present three main modes of interaction between the enjoyment and dialectics of socio-political identification. The first explains how imaginary promises of gaining back our enjoyment provides the fantasmatic support for the political projects, social roles, and choices; slogans such as "good life" or "just society" are fictions of future states when the fullness has already come. Secondly, the desire and motivation are sustained also by the subject's limit-experiences linked to a *jouissance* of the body, not only by the discursive promise of fullness. These experiences are reinforcing practices associated with the defeat of an enemy (i.e., war, trade, sports) or partial celebratory practices linked to the promised fullness. However, similar to the experiences mentioned above, the enjoyment that derives from them is also partial, momentary, and unable to be sustained and to fully satisfy; it thereby ends up fueling dissatisfaction. Hence, the partial

jouissance reinscribes the absence in the subject and the always already lost *jouissance*: it reproduces the fantasmatic promise of its recapture. Thirdly, the promise of always escaping full enjoyment is linked to the Lacanian *objet petit a*, which is the cause of the desire, or the nucleus of a subject's fantasy. This must be actively forgotten along with the denial of the absence, which gives rise to the logic of fantasy. What is more, the lack of enjoyment is attributed to someone who has "stolen it". Fantasy shapes identity and fosters desire, and it does so by structuring the social subject's partial enjoyment through a series of collective practices and by reproducing itself at the level of representation in official and unofficial public discourse.

Another important element in this approach is the role of transgression. When fantasmatically structured, the enjoyment derived from transgression is the ultimate support and grip of a public order (Glynos 2001). This means that transgression sustains the power system because it is shaped by it (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008). Therefore, self-transgressions perpetuate the dominant and the hegemonic powers because they are contained and signified within the symbolic order, not outside of it.

The beatific and the horrific

As noted above, fantasy is a motivational force that drives individuals and groups towards particular goals that positivize the constitutive absences in a contingent world (Salter 2016). The way the fantasmatic dimension holds social and political reality is through a promise of a fullness-to-come once an obstacle has been overcome and the prediction of the disaster if the obstacle is not defeated (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008; Glynos et al. 2009). It satisfies our "hunger for certainty" by presenting a simplified two-way future with no middle ground (Eberle 2017): the beatific and the horrific. Whilst the beatific dimension is composed of the actions, agents, and conditions that will lead to the fullness-to-come, the horrific dimension involves all the signifiers that constitute the obstacle and are "responsible" for the stealing of our enjoyment, our *jouissance*. In order to attain this fixity, it needs representative groups or individuals (archetypical figures) to love and hate. Our very identity is portrayed as depending on this narrative (Eberle 2017).

2. Materials and Methods

In order to retrieve Trump's and Bolsonaro's main narratives, tweets from Donald Trump's and Jair Bolsonaro's Twitter accounts (@realdonaldtrump and @jairbolsonaro, respectively) from 1 March to 30 May (Trump = 1044; Bolsonaro = 698) were collected.

As Glynos (2001, 2008) and Eberle (2017) have pointed out, fantasy and fantasmatic logics are inherently narrative. A story can be defined as an actor(s) taking action(s) on something that culminates in a resolution(s).

In other words, a story can be analyzed taking in to account the structural categories Subject-Verb-Object, forming a triplet (from now on SVO) that can be generalized and thus applied to any story and narrative in any language (Aslanidis 2018).

Contrary to traditional studies about Twitter (Cervi and Roca 2017), since this study looks at the construction of actors, displaying what the actors do and how these elements compose the beatific dimension of the fullness-to-come and the horrific obstacle to overcome, as well as the predicted disaster if the obstacle wins (Glynos et al. 2009), Clause-Based Semantic Analysis (CBSTA) was applied, which consists of extracting triplets formed by the elementary syntactic components of language: Subject-Verb-Object (Roberts 2000; Rusu et al. 2007). The triplet strategy conceptualizes a narrative in clusters (Roberts 2000) and codes not only the signifiers but their structure in a statement, which allows the actions of political subjects, the objects of those actions along with their positive and negative affection, and the combination between these elements to be unveiled (Cervi and Tejedor 2020; Caiani and Porta 2011).

Aslanidis (2018) points out three main advantages of the CBSTA for populist narrative analysis. The first one is the reliability of the coding units because they follow objective, structural, and grammatical rules, which guarantee systematic, rigorous, and comparable units. It sets a much more valid criteria than the arbitrary segmentation that characterizes

other narrative methodologies. Secondly, triplets multiply the information due to the micro structural level of complexity; this makes the CBSTA particularly compatible with short texts, such as tweets, without sacrificing quality. Lastly, the SVO structure matches with the formal features of populist discourse: “elites steal people’s power and well-being” and the interplay between elites and people (subjects) through specific actions (verbs) (Aslanidis 2018).

Accordingly, only written text was considered. All multimedia content (videos, images) and the texts from the retweeted accounts were excluded from the sample. CBSTA allows both quantitative and qualitative data to be obtained: the quantitative dataset was composed of the semantic SVO triplets retrieved, which can be analyzed qualitatively observing the attributes of the actors and their actions, along with epithets and adjectives (Caiani and Porta 2011; Rusu et al. 2007).

3. Results

Both leaders addressed their constituents in a very particular way in the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. Table 1 shows the number of explicit references to the Coronavirus pandemic and the main signifiers of both discourses. First, it is worth noting that the number of explicit references was relatively low considering the global impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. Donald Trump exhibited fewer explicit references (79) compared to Jair Bolsonaro (141). While Trump mostly signified the pandemic as the “Coronavirus” (39.24%), the invisible enemy (20.25%), the virus (15.19%) and the pandemic (11.39%), Bolsonaro’s most frequently used signifiers were “Covid” (48.34%), “Coronavirus” (20.53%), “virus” (11.92%), and “pandemic/epidemic” (9.27%). Moreover, it is important to point out that 5 of the 12 times that the “virus” signifier was used by Donald Trump it was explicitly characterized as the “Chinese virus” or “China virus” (6.33%).

Table 1. Explicit references to the Coronavirus pandemic in Donald Trump’s and Jair Bolsonaro’s Twitter discourses.

	Trump		Bolsonaro	
	n	%	n	%
Coronavirus	31	39.24	31	20.53
Virus	12	15.19	18	11.92
Covid	5	6.33	73	48.34
Pandemic/epidemic	9	11.39	14	9.27
Crisis	1	1.27	11	7.28
Invisible enemy	16	20.25	0	0.00
War/Battle	3	3.80	4	2.65
Plague	2	2.53	0	0
Total	79	100	151	100

3.1. Donald Trump

Trump’s discourse presented reality in a very informal, explicit, and personal way, in opposition to traditional politics (Enli 2017). The use of capital letters, several exclamation marks, and informal words such as “hoax”, “nasty”, “dirty”, “crazy”, among others has also been noted. Following the two dimensions of fantasy, Trump’s political discourse on Twitter was predominantly horrific (52.76%) and was almost double the beatific dimension (26.76%) as listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Dimensions of fantasy in Trump’s Twitter discourse.

	SVO Triplets	%
Horrific	631	52.76
Beatific	320	26.76
Other content	245	20.48
Total SVO	1208	100

Source: elaborated by the authors (2020).

3.1.1. The Horrific

Table 3 shows the principal subjects of the horrific dimension of fantasy in Donald Trump's political discourse on Twitter. Donald Trump mainly targeted the Democratic Party (52.46%) and the Media (37.4%), who were defined as partners. The other two elements in the horrific dimension of fantasy in Trump's discourse were the Coronavirus pandemic (6.18%) and Republican in Name Only (RINO), his signifier to name the moderate members of the Republican Party (3.96%).

Table 3. Horrific dimension of fantasy in Trump's Twitter discourse.

	SVO Triplets	%
Democratic Party	331	52.46
Media	236	37.4
Coronavirus	39	6.18
RINO	25	3.96
Subtotal Horrific	631	100.00

Source: elaborated by the authors (2020).

The first component of the horrific was the Democratic Party (Table 4). Democrats were signified as "Do nothing". Trump dealt with this element of the horrific by not only attacking it but by mocking it. By using nicknames when referring to the main party figures, such as "Sleepy" Joe Biden, "Crazy" Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth "Pocahontas" Warren, "Crazy Nancy Pelosi", and "Mini" Mike Bloomberg, Trump ridiculed them every time he mentioned them. Even if it was a serious matter, mockery was always present when Trump talked about the Democrat Party leaders. Mike Bloomberg was by far his principal mockery target with 45 SVO triplets about him, followed by Bernie Sanders, who was portrayed as a loser, and "Sleepy" Joe Biden. Biden's mentions increased as the primaries advanced and Biden grew closer to the nomination. Trump attacked him on his mental fitness for office. Apart from the nickname "Sleepy Joe" that Trump put on him, he said Biden "doesn't know where he is or what he is doing" and "that he is asleep". In sum, humiliating and disrespectful humor was very important in Trump's representations of Democrats; here, the spectacular dimension was reinforced with a typical reality style. By means of nicknames, Trump characterized his rivals as ridiculous figures.

Table 4. Democratic Party.

Subject	Democrats
Epithets	<i>Do nothing</i> Democrats, <i>Sleepy</i> Joe Biden, <i>Crazy</i> Bernie Sanders, <i>Crazy</i> Nancy Pelosi, <i>Mini</i> Mike Bloomberg, Elizabeth <i>Pocahontas</i> Warren
Definitions	Democrats, Dems, DNC, Democratic Establishment, Radical Left, Obama
Adjectives	Weak, incompetent, pathetic, poor, radical,
Verbs (actions)	Do, get, should, play, complain, destroy, kill
Objects	Everything to disparage our Country and the People's voice, Democrats primary candidate to quit and endorse <i>Sleepy</i> Joe Biden, approve legislation, and come back to DC, golf, the Bernie Sanders campaign, economy-related activities

Other important elements in Trump's portrayal of the Democratic Party were the adjectives: 39 verbs were the ontological verbs including "to be", followed by the adjectives shown in Table 4: weak, incompetent, pathetic, poor, and radical. In opposition to them, Trump placed himself as the star who was strong and able to win the war and, in doing so, Keep America Great. After the ontological verbs came the verb "to do" (14 references) mostly followed by the phrase "everything to disparage the People's voice, our Country,

always complaining and killing small businesses” and “petroleum based anything”. The verb “to want” (12 references) shows the presence of the desire of the horrific to prevent people from desiring the same (such as taxes, open borders, green energy). Finally, the verb “should” was used to direct his demands around legislation approval and coming back to (work in) Washington.

Furthermore, a strong message Trump repeatedly delivered was that the Democratic establishment conspired against Bernie Sanders; this message was mostly related to how the Democratic National Convention, the “Democratic establishment”, “gets (primary presidential) candidates to endorse Joe Biden”, “destroying the Bernie Sanders’ campaign”, who “would have easily won”. Trump also suggested that Elizabeth Warren stayed in the race as long as it took in order to keep her voters away from Sanders, while the other candidates were preparing to quit the presidential race and endorse Joe Biden. This narrative portrayed Sanders as a victim of the vile Democratic establishment and seems to place Trump as a defender of Sanders against the established *elite* (that Hilton represented in 2016) that controlled the party and plotted against anyone that threatened the mainstream power structures. This can be understood as a strategy to keep dissident and antiestablishment voters with him, inviting them to join the Republican Party, and reinforcing the idea of “corrupted” planned elitist politics that had closed its doors to the grassroots movements, to *the people*.

Table 5 describes the second element of the horrific dimension in Trump’s discourse: the “Fake News Media”. This subject was mostly portrayed as “fake”, “corrupt”, as the “enemy of the people”, and “disgraceful”. This group of media included *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Times*, CNN, MSDNC, ABC, NBC, CBS, *The Wall Street Journal*, and even a part of Fox News, which was signified as “pleading to be politically correct”, and which was specifically mentioned 42 times. Trump stressed that Fake News was related to fake reporting and that some reporters “do everything to disparage our Country and the People’s voice”. They “always get it wrong”, but they also knowingly reported fake information and disinformation. For example, “they report it was a loss no matter what we say or do, no matter how big the win”. In one tweet, Trump mentioned that they “love to hate the massive Trump Coronavirus supply effort”. The horrific Fake News Media were the enemy of the people because they were part of the elite characterized by their lack of transparency and their manipulative use of information, and they were also presented as the Democratic Party’s partner.

Table 5. Media.

Subject	Media
Epithets	<i>Fake News</i> , Lamestream
Definitions	“Journalists”, Opposition Party, Democrats’ partners, CNN, NBC, ABC, <i>The New York Times</i> , <i>The Washington Post</i> , <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> , MSDNC, CBS
Adjectives	Fake, corrupt, Enemy of the People, disgraceful
Verbs (actions)	Do, Report, get, know, Make sound, blame
Objects	<i>Fake reporting</i> , everything to disparage our Country and <i>the People’s voice</i> , <i>Fake information</i> , disinformation, it is wrong, it was a loss no matter what, Russia

Source: elaborated by the authors (2020).

Coronavirus is a less mentioned but strongly signified horrific subject in Trump’s narrative (Table 6). At first, he said that his political enemies, the Democratic Party, and the Media, partnered to “inflame the Coronavirus situation”. However, as time passed, he began signifying it as the Chinese virus, the China Plague, the China virus, the Wuhan Coronavirus, and the “invisible enemy”. In doing so, he explicitly represented COVID-19 as a disease that came to the United States as a foreign phenomenon, fantasmatically

putting the responsibility of deaths and devastations caused by the pandemic on China, out of *the heartland*.

Table 6. Coronavirus pandemic.

Subject	Coronavirus Pandemic
Epithets	
Definitions	Coronavirus, Invisible Enemy, Covid, China plague, china virus, Wuhan Coronavirus
Adjectives	Invisible, Chinese, powerful
Verbs (actions)	Does not care, appeared, kill, will soon be, came
Objects	What party you are in, China, hundreds of thousands of people, in retreat, our country

Although Donald Trump constantly praised the Republican Party, he attacked and criticized a group of its moderate members, whom he called the “RINO” (Republican In Name Only). Famous politicians such as John McCain, Mitt Romney, George W. Bush, and other members of the Lincoln project belonged to the “RINO” group. The “RINO” were portrayed as losers and the “few remaining”. According to Trump, they were beaten by Donald Trump, they copied Ronald Reagan, and should love the MAGA Agenda: republican judges, the military, the second amendment, veterans, and low taxes. It was implicitly said that they did not love the MAGA Agenda or that they did not support it enough. Trump rejected moderate Republicans because, when faced with conflicts such as the impeachment he faced, they did not stand up for him (Table 7).

Table 7. Republican “in Name only” (RINO).

Subject	Moderate Members of the Republican Party
Epithets	RINO (Republican in Name Only)
Definitions	RINO, Lincoln Project, John McCain, George W. Bush, moderate pundits, and consultants
Adjectives	Losers, Few remaining
Verbs (actions)	Raise, fail, get beaten, copy, did not have, should love, do not like
Objects	Money, Donald Trump, Ronald Reagan, Impeachment, a chance, MAGA Agenda

3.1.2. The Beatific

Table 8 shows the number of SVO triplets that were found to have beatific content that are categorized and listed by subject. Contrary to the horrific, the SVO triplets containing the beatific in Trump’s Twitter discourse are almost the half the number of the horrific (see Table 1). The Republican Party was clearly the main element of Trump’s beatific dimension (51.88%), followed by the American People (29.06%), and himself (19.06%).

Table 8. Beatific dimension of fantasy in Trump’s Twitter discourse.

	SVO Triplets	%
Republican Party	166	51.88
American People	93	29.06
Donald Trump	61	19.06
Total beatific	320	100.00

With regard to the Republican Party, Table 9 summarizes the fact that between March and May, Trump defined the Republican Party around the candidates that were campaigning. When endorsing the Republican politicians, Trump described them as supporters of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) agenda, which was turned into Keep America Great (KAG). More precisely, the endorsed Republicans were said to love, defend, stand with, and protect the Second Amendment, the “unborn”, the military, veterans, farmers, small businesses, tax cuts, and America. They were also “strong on crime and borders” (100 mentions).

Table 9. Republican Party.

Subject	Republican Party
Epithets	—
Definitions	Endorsed Republican candidates for Senate, State government and House of Representatives.
Adjectives	Strong, tough, 100% prolife, real leader, great, fighter, proud
Verbs (actions)	Is, go, love, protect, defend support, work
Objects	MAGA Agenda, MAGA/KAG, Second amendment, strong on Crime, borders, the unborn, our military, veterans, farmers, America, our Country, small business, business, tax cuts

As listed in Table 10, Donald Trump portrayed “*the people*” as necessarily American. What is more, the few times he mentioned America, he attributed the same traits and actions to the country that he gave to *the people*, which were inherently and explicitly national. This construction of “*The American people*” was comprised of veterans, small business, farmers, the “unborn”, and the American citizens, who were fantasmatically opposed to illegal immigrants. American exceptionalism (Gans 2011) can be seen in the use of superlative adjectives: the strongest and most resilient were used when referring to *the people*; the greatest was used when referring to the healthcare system, experts, scientists, and doctors. The *people* were described as great, good, real, hardworking, incredible, and amazing (70 references). Trump’s narrative foretold that the people would prevail and would win, and that the nation would heal. He claimed that *The American people* wanted to go back to work (referring to the economic shutdown due to the Coronavirus pandemic) because they were losing their jobs, and said that we “cannot let the cure be worse than the problem”, which was a rhetorical way of suggesting that the cure, which was the economic shutdown due to the Coronavirus pandemic, was worse than the pandemic itself. For that reason, it can be suggested that Trump was more worried about the pandemic’s impact on the economy rather than on public health.

Table 10. The American People.

Subject	The American People
Epithets	—
Definitions	People, American people, Americans, we, American citizens, Military, Vets, Country, workers, Farmers, Unborn
Adjectives	Good, great, strong, united, hardworking, incredible, amazing
Verbs (actions)	Are, want, have, will prevail, need, will win, cannot let, lose, get, should not follow
Objects	Work, Republicans, wall, borders, the war on the Invisible enemy, business, the cure be worse than the problem, jobs, fake news, money, less money

The final important element of the beatific dimension of Donald Trump's narrative was himself (Table 11). The self-references were in first person, and he defined himself as a proud American. Trump positioned himself as a protector of the Country, a president that "gets the job done". At the time of the analysis, he basically achieved this by closing the borders and banning China (14 references). Moreover, he fought the horrific: he claimed that he worked hard to "expose corruption and dishonesty of Lamestream Media". Finally, it is worth noting that in the beginning of the civil unrest due to the George Floyd murder, he used the signifier "United States" when talking about himself: "The United States will be designated ANTIFA as a terrorist organization", putting her political opponents out of *the heartland*.

Table 11. Donald Trump.

Subject	Donald Trump
Epithets	—
Definitions	I
Adjectives	Proud
Verbs (actions)	Protect, close, issued, get, work, know
Objects	Country, borders, China ban, all back, the job done, to expose corruption and dishonesty of Lamestream Media

3.2. Jair Bolsonaro

President Bolsonaro's discourse on Twitter clearly differs from Trump's. As listed in Table 12, the SVO triplets for the beatific dimension (34.62%) were quadruple the number of the SVO triplets for the horrific dimension (8.04%). It is worth noting that most of the content did not fit the beatific or the horrific categories (57.33%).

Table 12. Dimensions of fantasy in Bolsonaro's Twitter discourse.

	SVO Triplets	%
Horrific	465	34.62
Beatific	108	8.04
Other content	770	57.33
Total SVO	1343	100

3.2.1. The Beatific

Table 13 shows the principal subjects of the beatific dimension of fantasy in Jair Bolsonaro's political discourse on Twitter. The government was largely the principal agent (67.47%), followed by the Brazilian *people* (13.86%), and Jair Bolsonaro (8.13%). The military, the United States, Hydroxychloroquine, and God were other fantasmatically significant but not frequently mentioned elements of the beatific in Bolsonaro's narrative, with less than 3% each. However, some fantasmatic entities were rarely and explicitly shown, because they underlay daily actions, statements, and policies (Glynos 2008, 2001). Thus, their importance cannot be measured in quantitative terms only.

The main beatific agent in Bolsonaro's narrative on Twitter was the Government. Mostly defined by the signifiers "Government", "Federal Government" (247 references), this agent was portrayed as the doer, the provider, without any adjectives, who was discursively defined only by its actions, which were always in favor of the Brazilian people (Table 14). In that sense, Bolsonaro constructed his government as the one that took action and worked to manage the resources to provide what the *people* needed in the midst of the Coronavirus crisis: economic aid, resources, funds release, low taxes, healthcare, and houses. It is worth noting that the Government, as a beatific agent, was embedded in the Coronavirus crisis.

Table 13. Beatific dimension of fantasy in Bolsonaro's Twitter discourse.

	SVO Triplets	%
Government	365	67.47
Brazilian people	75	13.86
Jair Bolsonaro	44	8.13
Military	16	2.96
United States	16	2.96
Hydroxychloroquine	13	2.40
God	12	2.22
Total	497	100

Table 14. The Government.

Subject	Government
Epithets	—
Definitions	Government, Federal Government, Ministries, We, The Executive
Adjectives	—
Verbs (actions)	Act, releases, allocates, continue, gives, finishes, cuts, calls, authorize, suspends, announces, extends, gives, uses, produces
Objects	Millions of <i>reais</i> , resources, its actions, its work, houses, constructions, taxes, physicians, production, debt payments, hydroxychloroquine

Similar to Trump, Bolsonaro's representation of *the people* was intrinsically linked to Brazil. He treated both concepts as synonyms (58 references): they performed the same actions and had the same qualities (Table 15). The Brazilian *people* were portrayed as united, strong, and generous. The people wanted work, food, and health because they were hungry and were in a hurry to get back to work; he also claimed that "the people" would also win the battle and get through it. They received aid too. Bolsonaro's discourse clearly addressed/constructed *people's* desires, which were fantasmatically opposed to lockdown measures and the economy shutdown. Similar to the previous beatific agent, *the people* were a subject whose fantasmatic discursive construction was defined by the Coronavirus pandemic: their desires and struggles could not be understood without the pandemic situation.

Table 15. Brazilian *People*.

Subject	Government
Epithets	Brazilian people
Definitions	—
Adjectives	Brazilians, Brazil, people, population, patients, nation, workers, heads of household
Verbs (actions)	United, strong, generous
Objects	Want, will win, receive, are, will get through

In Table 16, it is shown that Bolsonaro referred to himself in the first person most of the time. Contrary to what might be expected of populist leaders, Bolsonaro seldom mentioned himself compared to the frequency that he mentioned the Government and he only did so in order to show a more personal dimension. He expressed his positive wishes and worries, emphasizing that he would not allow (evil) actions against Brazil and himself, or lies (Table 16). Additionally, Table 17 shows three other components of the beatific that have symbolic relevance in spite of their low number of mentions: the military, the United States, and Hydroxychloroquine. The military were presented as a branch of government

because they fought against the Coronavirus pandemic, and produced and provided the necessary health supplies; the United States were portrayed as an international partner that defended democracy, freedom, and safety, and an ideological ally that helped Brazil; and hydroxychloroquine was presented as an effective treatment against COVID-19, which was also recommended by physicians. The portrayal of hydroxychloroquine as a beatific subject might have been instrumental: if there was a cure, there was no reason to keep the economy closed.

Table 16. Jair Bolsonaro.

Subject	Jair Bolsonaro
Epithets	—
Definitions	I, Bolsonaro, President
Adjectives	—
Verbs (actions)	Wish, determine, will not let, do not see, restore, worry
Objects	Strength, actions against Brazil and myself, the truth, about jobs

Table 17. Military, United States, and Hydroxychloroquine.

Subject	Military	United States	Hydroxychloroquine
Epithets	—	—	—
Definitions	Armed Forces, Military, Airforce	Relation with USA, Mission Brazil/USA, Trump	Hydroxychloroquine, Cloroquina,
Adjectives		Good	Effective
Verbs (actions)	Fight, produce, give,	Defend, promote, help	Is, is used, has
Objects	Covid, health supplies, masks	Democracy, freedom, security, American interest in Brazil, Brazil entrance to OECD	Hope, effective against Covid, recommended by physicians,

The final important element in the beatific dimension of fantasy is God (Table 18), who was portrayed as a subject that was “above all”. Bolsonaro presented this particular discursive trait, the element of fullness and totality, as an agent who blesses, resurrects, and loves, but especially as an observer who reveals (sees, unveils, exposes, enlightens) everything. God had a foundational role in Bolsonaro’s discursive constructions. It was the underlying proposition and the silent basis that was not frequently mentioned but held a very strong symbolic meaning. It is also worth mentioning is that he cited and used biblical language.

Table 18. God.

Subject	God
Epithets	—
Definitions	God, Him, Jesus
Adjectives	—
Verbs (actions)	Bless, resurrects, sees, unveils, exposes, loves, enlightens, gave
Objects	Brazil, everyone, everything, the world, professional workers, his son, eternal life

3.2.2. The Beatific

Table 19 lists the principal subjects of the horrific dimension of fantasy in Jair Bolsonaro political discourse on Twitter. The media had the highest number of allusions (35.78%), followed by the Judiciary (17.59%), the Workers Party (12.96%), PT due to its original name Partido dos Trabalhadores, and the State Governors (11.11%). Former ministry of Justice Sergio Moro (8.33%) and other elements (13.89%), including crime related content, were in the last positions. It is worth noting that these mixed horrific elements that did not belong to any specific category were articulated in null-subject language.

Table 19. Horrific dimension of fantasy in Bolsonaro’s Twitter discourse.

	SVO Triplets	%
Media	39	36.11
Judiciary	19	17.59
Worker’s Party	14	12.96
State governors	12	11.11
Sergio Moro	9	8.33
Other elements	15	13.89
Horrific	108	100

Table 20 shows the actions of the Media, the main horrific obstacle to be overcome in Bolsonaro’s narrative. The Media was represented by *Estadão* and *Globo*, the mainstream Brazilian media networks, as well as “journal”, “journalists”, “media” and “press”. In relation to the Coronavirus pandemic, they were explicitly portrayed as partialized liars that spread panic and ignored Government actions. They were also signified as agents that covered (favored) the judiciary’s actions against him and treated criminals as victims.

Table 20. Media.

Subject	Media
Epithets	—
Definitions	<i>Estadão</i> , journal, journalists, <i>Globo</i> , media, press, station
Adjectives	Liars, partialized, idiot, trash,
Verbs (actions)	Spread, ignore, lie, cover, publish, treat, blame
Objects	Panic, government actions, to the people, judiciary actions (against Bolsonaro), criminals as victims, the president

Table 21 describes how Bolsonaro represented the Judiciary. It is important to consider that this horrific element only appeared in May when the courts started a case against Bolsonaro due to allegations of misinformation spreading. For that reason, the judiciary were described as opportunists who prosecuted and accused him, and who had infiltrated people in his cabinet, and who favored *Partido da Republica*.

Table 21. Judiciary.

Subject	Judiciary
Epithets	—
Definitions	Judiciary, Federal Supreme Court, Augusto Aras
Adjectives	Opportunists,
Verbs (actions)	Prosecutes, accuses, favors, infiltrates
Objects	Bolsonaro, <i>Partido da Republica</i>

Additionally, Table 22 describes the way in which the Worker’s Party (PT) and the State Governors were portrayed. On one hand, the “PT” signifier represented the party and its leaders, namely, former presidents and Fernando Haddad, his former opponent in the last presidential race. Although Bolsonaro occasionally mentioned them, he stressed that PT told lies and had a corrupt government that had indoctrinated and abandoned Brazil. On the other, the Governors were unequivocally characterized by their “authoritarian” measures and their “challenging” of the rule of law (Table 22), referring to their measures that opposed his government’s course of action to address the Coronavirus pandemic.

Table 22. Worker’s Party (PT) and State Governors.

Subject	Workers’ Party (PT)	State Governors
Epithets	–	
Definitions	PT, Fernando Haddad, former Presidents	Governors
Adjectives	Corrupt, bad joke	—
Verbs (actions)	Tell, abandon, indoctrinate	Take, attack, do not follow, cause
Objects	Lies, pandemic will end capitalism, brazil	Authoritarian measures, rule of law

Finally, Bolsonaro’s representations of Sergio Moro were in relation to him. He defined Sergio Moro as “Judas”, which fantasmatically positioned himself as “Jesus”, a messianic figure betrayed by a person who once had his confidence and was his former ministry (Table 23). Moreover, he claimed that the former Ministry “spreads chats without authorization and interferes in order to prevent inquiry”. The other elements of the horrific were unclearly defined subjects who wished chaos, power, and the worst for Brazil, which suggested the presence of conspiracy thinking.

Table 23. Sergio Moro and other elements.

Subject	Sergio Moro	Other Elements
Epithets		
Definitions	Judas, Former Ministry, Moro	Criminals, those who,
Adjectives	—	—
Verbs (actions)	Spread, interfere	Want to get out, agitates, wish
Objects	Chats without authorization, to prevent inquiry,	Of prison, protests, the worst for brazil, chaos, intrigue, power, destroy Brazil

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The study findings confirmed the predominance and pervasiveness of the affective dimension of populist discourse during the Coronavirus pandemic. Presidents Trump and Bolsonaro clearly defined the elements that constituted the fullness-to-come in relation to a network of signifiers such as the *people*, their institutionally supported political actions, and themselves. In spite of a pandemic which could be signified as a horrific subject, both leaders insisted on putting their political enemies at the core of the horrific dimension of their fantasmatic narrative with populist signifiers such as the media and their opposition parties, though in different frequencies and symbolic constructions.

Foremost, both narratives have common ground. Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro portrayed themselves as solid authorities whose desires and measures were institutionally supported. In both cases their institutional supporters appeared as the first and most mentioned beatific agents. For Donald Trump, it was the Republican Party who fought

for and supported the Make America Great Again Agenda, and for Jair Bolsonaro, a president without an established political party, the most important beatific subject was the government itself. Despite the personalistic tendencies expected from populist leaders (Mudde 2004), Trump's and Bolsonaro's authority relied on (needed) institutional support. In both cases, they used their institutional supporters to strengthen their approaches to the pandemic, and they stressed that they were with *the people* and stressed their need to have the economy open.

Moreover, the national *people* were the second beatific subject in their narratives. In both cases, the most mentioned verb was the ontological, the verb "to be", followed by adjectives; and the verb "to want", which was unequivocally linked to desire. Their representations portrayed a united, strong, and desiring *people* that wanted to go back to work (thus the government had to keep the economy open) and whose qualities would allow them to overcome the Coronavirus pandemic. This construction of *the people's* desires and their ontological actions clearly showed that what made *people* virtuous and beatific was labor: they represented *the people* as *working people*. Then, it followed that the worst impact that the pandemic could have on their constituents was on their ability to work. One final aspect worth mentioning is that although the presidents tended to represent their constituents as nationals, Trump and Bolsonaro stressed their people's national identity, using their countries' names (United States, Brazil) as equivalent signifiers to the people, attributing to them the same actions and adjectives which were also shared in both leaders' representations.

Thirdly, a key element to understand Trump's and Bolsonaro's narratives around their construction of the horrific is the notion of conspiracy. Contrary to the expected call for national unity, leaving politics aside in the midst of a global crisis detected by other studies focusing on non-populist politicians (Pérez Tornero et al. 2021), both leaders insisted on their portrayal of their political enemies as dark and corrupted *elites* and enemies of *the people* who wanted to keep them out of power and who spread lies through *fake news* and misinformation. Despite their differences in the number of mentions, the media was a key subject of their horrific dimensions of fantasy, who now spread misinformation about the pandemic, causing panic and ignoring their government actions.

Nevertheless, there are differences between Trump's and Bolsonaro's Twitter political discourses. Firstly, there are distinctions worth mentioning related to the representation of the Coronavirus pandemic. Even though both leaders shared the portrayal of the pandemic's impact and defended the use of hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19, they characterized the Coronavirus differently. While Donald Trump portrayed it as a subject who had certain attributes (e.g., Chinese, invisible) and did terrible things (e.g., killed people and would soon be in retreat), Bolsonaro signified it as a bad situation (crisis) in which the government acted (e.g., released funds, provided, gave) to protect *the people*. This is relevant because in Trump's narrative the virus was an actor that made things happen, whereas in Bolsonaro's narrative the virus was a scenario where things happened. On one hand, Trump emphasized the foreign (non-American) nature of the virus, "the invisible enemy", strengthening his nationalist narrative and portraying the virus as an agent from a geopolitical rival. On the other hand, Jair Bolsonaro used the circumstantial approach to strengthen his political leadership and character through government actions, giving detailed accounts of the policies and measures his government was implementing.

Another distinction between Trump and Bolsonaro is the way they sustained their authority and political leadership. Donald Trump mainly relied on the Republican Party, an established party that defended his political agenda and legitimized him. It was through the Republican Party that the fullness would come or return: American greatness depended on the Republicans because they would follow the Make America Great Again (MAGA) Agenda. Thus, the American people needed them. However, Bolsonaro's narrative openly emphasized his government's actions in favor of *the people*. It was through government that he showed his political capacity to his constituents, with a much more pragmatic and traditional approach than Trump's. However, it seems that depending exclusively on

a temporary agent such as the government was not enough. For that reason, Bolsonaro sought support in other beatific agents: one institutional, the military; one international, the United States; one circumstantial, Hydroxychloroquine; and one mystical, God. Despite the low frequency of their mentions, these agents strengthened him politically in different domains: governability, international politics, healthcare, and religion/spirituality.

Although both leaders emerged and won their presidencies by channeling the social rage and discomfort with the political establishment represented by the Democratic Party and the Workers Party, respectively, (Di Carlo and Kamradt 2018; Enli 2017; Francia 2018; Hunter and Power 2019; Judis 2017; Ortellado and Riberio 2018) their fantasmatic focus was different. Whilst Bolsonaro's fantasmatic narrative was largely beatific, Trump's was clearly horrific. In the pandemic, Bolsonaro emphasized his government's measures in favor of the people, which exhibited a much higher number of mentions than any other subject, independently of its beatific or horrific nature, while Trump remained predominantly reactive to the corrupt Fake News Media and the incompetent Democratic Party, which *continued* to deprive America of its greatness.

This difference could be explained in terms of the political systems of each country. On one side, the United States exhibits a solidly institutionalized bipartisan system, in which the Democratic Party now controls the Low Chamber in Congress, several state and local governments, and was definitely going to be his electoral rival in the 2020 presidential election. On the other, Bolsonaro's political arena was composed of a multi-party system controlled by *Centrão*, a group of establishment political parties, in which he did not fit and that led him to create his own political party, Alliance for Brazil, in 2019. Another contributing factor might be each leader's political career. Donald Trump entered politics as an outsider whose narrative was that he had to run for President because the political establishment was ruining the United States, destroying its identity and values. Conversely, Bolsonaro is a career politician who has been in public office almost his entire life and although he positioned himself as the strongest figure against political correctness, the majority of his messages clearly show a traditional governmental communication style.

In conclusion, in spite of the Coronavirus pandemic, the main beatific and horrific elements remain the core populist signifiers: the (national) people as beatific and the elite as horrific, namely the media and their political enemies. Nonetheless, Trump signified the pandemic as a subject, a Chinese enemy to be defeated, and Bolsonaro signified it as a circumstance where the government took action. Finally, they also differ on their narrative focus: while Bolsonaro basically displayed a beatific fantasmatic narrative based on government actions in favor of the people, Trump's focus was on the horrific side, the corrupted elite.

Altogether our results allow us to state that focusing on the fantastic horrific construction in political discourse can effectively make a novel contribution to the existing knowledge of both populist and non-populist communicative strategies.

Accordingly, on the one hand, future research should compare more discourses of populist politicians to study the (possible) existence of common patterns, such as the ones retrieved, for example, in anti-immigration discourses (Cervi and Tejedor 2021; Cervi et al. 2020). On the other hand, it would be helpful to apply this methodology to non-populist actors to deepen our understanding of how the mediatization of politics (Marín Lladó and Tornero 2020; Higgins 2017; Mazzoleni 2008) forces most political actors to embrace a more emotionally driven communication style.

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