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# Populism in the XXI Century in Brazil: A Dangerous Ambiguity

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I hope to shed light on the social and institutional transformation processes in Brazil in the 21st century, contrasting what can be understood as two populist waves. The first is the one led by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, as a left-wing leader whose government has been internationally recognized for implementing distributive economic policies (inclusion of the poorest majority) and inclusive social policies (inclusion of racial and sexual minorities). The second is the right-wing wave led by Jair Bolsonaro, internationally recognized, but rather for embracing a discourse contrary to the inclusive practices adopted by their predecessor. Thus, the question I want to answer is: How can the same concept fit into such different phenomena? My hypothesis is that we are facing two patterns of representative relations. An inclusive one that aims to expand the number of groups that can be properly represented within the political collectivity, increasing its pluralism, and an exclusive one that aims to restrict them, shortening the plurality of groups and identities that forms the people. In both, the theme of racial and sexual minorities becomes a priority. Through this discussion, I want to emphasize the substantive and existential quality of the differences between these two representative patterns that are sometimes neglected or reduced by those who use the concept of populism to attribute some kind of symmetry or ideological convergence between them.

**Keywords:** political theory; critical theory; populism; representation; gender; Brazil; Ernesto Laclau; Chantall Mouffe; political ideologies

## 1. Introduction

Representation in populist thought and the way the relationship between the demos and power is established is the core question of this paper. I will discuss how the populist challenge could, directly and indirectly, affect the way representative democracy works. The focus will be on how populists build their own audience and the institutional realignment they propose in order to empower the people's will.

For this purpose, I will examine the Brazilian case, using the concept of populism as a heuristic tool that allows us to analyze two dimensions that seem useful in comparing two distinct leaders who were pejoratively called populists. The first aims to describe the genesis of the political subjects that will be represented by the leader, explaining how the bonds between them were formed. The second dimension aims to describe the effects of each phenomenon in the political system. To this end, I will blend different definitions of the concept, considering its nuances and affinities within each dimension. My hypothesis is that, after the comparison is established, the concept loses its usefulness if applied symmetrically to both cases. The reason is that although they both used speeches that resorted to a populist form, that is, anti-elitism and people centrism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a, 2017; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018, p. 3), this mobilization was guided by different ideological content, one with an inclusive bias and the other with an exclusion bias. Furthermore, when we move from speeches to government, we can see that the Workers' Party did not carry out public policies that reinforced these dynamics, so their governing performance cannot be properly characterized by the category. Therefore, we conclude that the concept of populism cannot equally qualify the two cases.

In other words, Bolsonaro and Lula used what is called a populist form, and they did so during the electoral campaign and even in public speeches addressed to the population during their mandate. However, in their relationship with the Legislative, Judiciary, and other offices and agents of the Public Administration, as well as in the formulation and execution of public policies, only Bolsonaro continued to bet on antagonism, Manichaeism, and other elements that compose populism as a political form (idem).

As explained by Nadia Urbinati (2014), representative democracy is based on a diarchic structure that separates will (the procedures and the institutions) and opinion (the extra-institutional domain of political opinions). For the author, the populist telos is to establish a non-mediated link between the leader and the people and to overtake the representative structure of liberal democracy—that is, the intermediate bodies such as parties, trade unions, and so on (Silva and Adinolfi 2018). It is this impetus to destroy liberal-democratic institutions that we do not find in the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lombardo et al. 2022).

Based on the assumption that reality is not objectively given, Pitkin argues that representation must be understood as a performative act and, therefore, as socially and historically constructed (Pitkin [1967] 2015). Representation is a constitutive relationship that does not simply mirror pre-existing political identities, but rather contributes towards creating such identities) shaped in a relation of power and ideology (Disch 2015). As stated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in the classic Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), the agent (the representative figure), situated in the political dimension, functions as a constitutive exterior (Silva 2018). Its role is to transform a set of social subjects into a cohesive political subject: The people. This is the process that, twenty years later, was named by Ernesto Laclau (2005) as the "Populist Reason" that is conceived as a dynamic of representation through which the bonds between leaders and followers are formed. Regarding this concept, it is fundamental to emphasize that the type of dynamics it defines does not necessarily result in populist governments.

According to Laclau, such a relationship is constitutive of every political subject. The specificity of populism, in turn, is that the connection between different social groups will shape the people (Silva and Rodrigues 2015). Another group, identified as an "enemy", creates this connection through the perception of a common threat. It is the speech of the leader that points out the common enemy and it is through the identification with it that the equivalence chains are created, bringing different social subjects closer together. It will be through this theoretical framework that we will understand the emergence of what has been called lulismo, a derivative analogous to Peronism or Varguism, used to emphasize the populist character of the relationship established between Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and his followers. In this phenomenological appearance, this kind of leadership has a left-wing feature, as I will demonstrate using a traditional ideological measurement methodology: The Comparative Manifesto Project (Klingemann et al. 2006; Budge and Meyer 2013; Jorge et al. 2018). In short, I can say that this left-wing feature is given by economic and social policies, specifically affirmative actions aimed at the inclusion of demographic and non-demographic minorities and distributive economic policies that improved the living conditions of the popular classes.

Then, in dialog with the recent literature about the case (Hunter and Power 2019; Power and Rodrigues-Silveira 2018; Amaral 2020; Gracino et al. 2021; Silva and Rodrigues 2021; Silva et al., forthcoming; Silva, forthcoming), I will discuss Bolsonaro's rise through the dissemination of right-wing discourses capable of spreading the perception of threat and enmity towards the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), in particular, and towards the left, in general. Since this idea of threat is aimed exactly at groups that achieved some degree of inclusion during these governments, our hypothesis is that we are facing two patterns of representative relations. The inclusive one aims to expand the number of groups that can be adequately represented within the political collectivity, increasing its pluralism, and an exclusive one that aims to restrict them, shortening the plurality of groups and identities that form the equivalence chain. In both, the theme of racial and sexual minorities becomes

a priority. In the first, it gains an affirmative and inclusive character, and, in the second, a negative and repressive drive, given by conservative speeches in defense of a traditional understanding of family and society. Through this discussion, I want to emphasize the substantive and existential quality of the differences between these two representative patterns that are sometimes neglected or reduced by those who use the concept of populism to attribute some kind of ideological symmetry between them.

## 2. Why Populists? What Is Populism?

This paper compares the populist nature of two different Brazilian leaders and their governments: The one led by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and the current government led by Jair Bolsonaro. Its main goal is to answer whether both presidents can be properly characterized as populist using a comparative analysis between the populist features of both. For this, I propose a theoretical approach that combines an ideational and a discursive approach to populism.

Following Michael Saward's insights, there are essentially three features involved in the representative process: The representation maker, in that case, a politician, the message, and the audience (Saward 2010). In that framework, the audience must be seen as an active subject since it could reject, amend, or accept the claim maker's message.

However, as it clearly appears, the narrower the message proposed to the audience, that is, without any contrasting or oppositional subjects, the easier it will be for the demagogue to persuade it. The Social Media revolution has certainly hit the intermediate body and made the relationship between the top and the bottom of society apparently closer. To a certain extent, we are not far from what was described on the impact of society's massification and the charismatic role of the leaders toward the psychologies of the crowd in the seminal works of Gustave Le Bon one century ago (Le Bon 2013).

However, populism is not just demagogic rhetoric used by charismatic leaders to increase their audience, it is also an overarching framework to conceive the relationship between citizen and power; in other words, it must also encompass the way in which the rhetorical discourse is translated into a consistent institutional apparatus (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Most of the post-foundationalist literature on this subject focuses mainly on the former point, the discourse (Laclau 2002, 2003, 2005; Mouffe 2018). Nonetheless, if we are to advance towards a better comprehension of the populist phenomena as a whole, it is crucial to deal with the institutional framework.

Populism is, nowadays, the main challenger to the stability of liberal democracies[1]. However, it is still hard to define exactly what populism is. The extensive literature on this topic is divided into several lines of interpretations. In the Political Science field, Cas Mudde's two-fold definition, analyzed in this section, prevails: Revolt of the pure people against the elite(s) and thin ideology (Mudde 2007). As explained by Michael Freeden (1996), a lack of ideology and anti-elitism is not enough and, to some extent, not the right way to explain the populist phenomenon (Freeden 2017, p. 3). That is why it is essential to use other approaches. In this paper, I will employ the approach derived from Ernesto Laclau's discourse theory.

In a certain manner, this case repeats the same misunderstanding concerning fascism, in the way it has been interpreted (among others) by Emilio Gentile (2003), as a form of anti-ideological ideology. However, despite some variations, at the source of any populist discourse, there is 'the people' as the main source of legitimacy. Thus, the twofold definition given by Carl Schmitt is closer to a meaningful interpretation (Schmitt 2004). The contrast between legitimacy and the rule of law, highlighted by the German constitutionalist, must be resolved and the legitimacy awarded by the people must prevail over the rule of law. Given its anti-pluralistic bias, the main antagonist of populism is not democracy per se, but liberal and representative democracy. However, here is the question: How exactly could a populist democracy be ruled? Furthermore, what are, or what could be, the institutional characteristics of a populist regime? The answers to these questions go beyond the scope of this paper since my goal here is to use the concept of populism to construct a heuristic

framework for the chosen cases. With this effort, I hope to be able to shed light on the processes of social and institutional transformation that took place in Brazil, in the 21st century, contrasting what could be understood as two populist waves. The first is the one led by Luis Inácio Lula da Silva as a left-wing populist, whose government has been internationally recognized for implementing inclusive practices in macroeconomic politics (inclusion of the poorest) but also in social politics (inclusion of racial and sexual minorities). The second is the right-wing wave led by Jair Bolsonaro, which is also internationally recognized, but for embracing a discourse contrary to the inclusive practices adopted by its predecessor.

Thus, the question we want to answer is: *How can the same concept fit into such different phenomena?* For this reason, I emphasize the importance of the ideological component that escapes the formal character of populism as an ideologically neutral operator. In other words, it is an ideology and not populism that gives a phenomenon its existential character, since it is through it that the movements of inclusion and exclusion can be settled, given the number of identities that can be properly represented within the political community.

The plurality of definitions of populism and its omnipresence in the current political debate raise different reactions among analysts. As a result, we opted for a definition of populism that aims to be lean and instrumental, since it was conceived with the purpose of reinforcing its measurable effects (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018, p. 7; Hawkins et al. 2012). The so-called ideational approach is, therefore, based on its objective: To indicate causal mechanisms that (i) describe the performance of leaders and (ii) explain why they find support among the population, understanding such performance in discursive (proposals, statements) and material terms (public decisions and policies) (Silva et al. 2021; Silva 2022, forthcoming).

This perspective does not imply reducing populism to charisma or a political strategy by which a leader exercises power through a direct relationship with their followers (Weyland 2003). Although they are important attributes in understanding the nature of the phenomena, a definition limited to them would be too centered on the sender of the speeches (the bottom-up dimension), neglecting their reception (the top-down dimension).

Thus, the semantic center of the concept of populism chosen by us is composed of two elements: Anti-elitism and people centrism. The latter implies an emphasis on the people as a sovereign political actor, holder of the general will, which is claimed as the basis of legitimacy of the decisions taken by the leader. This definition unfolds in three requirements for a case to be classified in the category of populism: (a) A Manichean moral cosmology; (b) perception of the people as a homogeneous and virtuous totality; and (c) opposition to an elite considered to be corrupt and savage (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013b, 2017; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018, p. 3). These elements function as a common denominator present in all expressions of populism, avoiding the application of the concept to any modern political phenomenon (Mudde 2004, p. 545) and allowing the identification of subtypes (Canovan 1984; Mouzelis 1985).

A populist discourse is defined in Laclaunian terms as the capacity to form an equivalence chain, bringing together different social subjects, whose identities, to a greater or lesser extent, dissolve in the formation of a new political subject (Laclau 2005; Silva 2022, forthcoming). From this perspective, there would be no populist ideology that would allow us to think about how populism would behave (in abstract or a priori) about justice, rights, equality, and freedom, or in the face of a global pandemic. To address these issues, each particular empirical manifestation makes up more or less coherent articulations between distinct ideological components. This is what allows us to think of subtypes of populism, or particularly, in our case, right-wing and left-wing populisms.

Nevertheless, although all manifestations of populism are defined by the use (to a lesser or greater degree) of a Manichaean cosmology that reduces politics to the struggle between the pure people and the corrupt elite (Canovan 1984, pp. 3–4), both terms are constituted as empty vessels, filled with different contents that will define the criteria of belonging to each group (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a, p. 151). The populist

discourse would be characterized, however, by manipulating this reservoir of ideas and values more loosely than other discursive forms such as science, religion, and ideologies, for example.

In other words, populism does not imply an articulated set of principles and ideas (in the form of a proper ideology). It is a harborer or a host (Freeden 1998; Silva 2022, forthcoming) who loosely, and sometimes ambiguously, organizes the ideological contents to be operationalized by its semantic core comprising anti-elitism and people-centrism. This laxity implies floating definitions about the necessary requirements to be included as praiseworthy by the people or as eligible elites to be fought (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, pp. 21–22), which vary conveniently according to the correlation of forces available to the populist leader. The more committed to ideological coherence, the lower the capacity of the leader to modulate their speeches in order to obtain the support of different social segments.

However, as we will see over the next pages, through the analysis of the ideological components that make up Jair Bolsonaro's speeches, it was possible to observe how their structure follows a typical pattern of the populist *New Right* (Drolet 2014; Hawley 2018; Silva 2022, forthcoming; Silva et al., forthcoming), since it is through a moralistic Manichaeism that its ideological contents are organized; namely with anti-corruption, punitivism, hostility to minorities and neoliberalism (intended to be understood as cuts in transfers made by the state to "parasites" that depend on it), with the central element in this articulation being the hegemonic idea of meritocracy (the strongest deserves to win). However, when we make a comparison with Lula's speeches, we can see that the same ideological elements are not present. Even if we consider some Manicheism in the relation with "the people" (named as the oppressed for being poor or for being discriminated as a sexual or racial minority), they are oriented by a redistributive and inclusive drive that is the central core of the contra-hegemonic, radical, democratic, and leftist project presented by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

### 3. What Does It Mean to Be Right-Wing or Left-Wing? What Are Ideologies? How to Measure Them?

The concept of political ideology is also the subject of a fruitful debate that is beyond the scope of this article. Understood as "mental shortcuts" that simplify a myriad of values, desires, perspectives, and views, political ideologies are considered here from an instrumental perspective. Under this view, the terms 'right' and 'left' will be defined, recognizing that, since the French Revolution, they have functioned as a means of classifying political identities, reducing the complexity of the political universe (Fuchs and Klingemann 1990, p. 205).

Furthermore, since our focus is on the reception and mobilization of ideological content by political actors, I will abstain from their theoretical-philosophical appreciation, focusing on other methodological strategies. Thus, bypassing the controversies established in both dimensions (methodological and theoretical), we chose to work with an approach already consolidated in the field of political ideologies: The one offered by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP-MARPOR). Founded by Ian Budge and David Robertson, in 1979, the Manifesto Research Group (MRG) is an international project that seeks to examine the programmatic measures presented in the manifestos of political parties with parliamentary representation and, in the case of presidential systems, of candidates who run for presidential elections (Klingemann et al. 2006, p. xvii; Jorge et al. 2018). The methodology developed by CMP-MARPOR provides an independent operationalization that makes it possible to identify some categories as right and left. After analyzing the entire government program, the positioning of a given political party on the left–right scale is obtained by calculating an index, known as RILE (Budge and Meyer 2013, p. 65; Dinas and Gemenis 2009, p. 4; Jorge et al. 2018, p. 5).

In summary, the methodology consists of assigning categories to portions of text that indicate their ideological content, listed in a manual made available to coders (Werner et al.

2014). In this article, I will not stick to the calculation itself, but to the categories used as indicators of an ideological positioning on the right and on the left, so that we can define the ideological profile of what we mean by right-wing and left-wing populism.

Following these instructions it is observed that the categories[2] associated with the left emphasize the following contents:

A.   The condemnation of imperial behavior and/or a strong commercial, military, or political State influence over other countries.

B.   Criticism of the Armed Forces and/or the use of military power in conflict and, consequently, the valuation of peace or peaceful means as the best way to overcome crises.

C.   The need to prioritize international cooperation or, in other words, the defense of multilateralism.

D.   The idea of democracy as the only acceptable form of government.

E.   An economic policy favorable to government intervention in order to create a more competitive and fair market, long-term planning, protection of the internal market, price control, and preservation of state control over companies and land.

F.   The need to increase public spending in order to expand the education system and/or introduce, maintain, or expand any public or social security service.

G.   The defense of the working class, including the unemployed in general, and of the unions and all other labor associations.

The categories associated with the right[3], in turn, are related to the following contents:

H.   Armed Forces and, consequently, the need to invest in the maintenance and strengthening of these institutions, in order to guarantee security and external defense.

I.   Individual freedom, human and civil rights, which means, on the one hand, the defense of freedom of expression, of the press, of owning property and disposing of it as you wish, of assembly, etc., and, on the other hand, the criticism of bureaucratic control and state coercion in the political and economic spheres.

J.   Preservation of the constitution.

K.   An economic policy favorable to the reduction of the public deficit, which implies, among other things, limiting State expenditures on social services or social security.

L.   The reduction or elimination of protectionism and, consequently, the defense of free trade.

M.   General patriotic appeals and emphasis in the nation's history.

N.   Traditional and religious moral values.

O.   Stricter law enforcement and tougher actions against domestic crime (Silva et al. 2021; Silva 2022).

Using this approach to analyze the two waves of populism in Brazil, it is possible to highlight, for the left-wing party, items C, D, E, F, and G. Although anti-imperialism and the criticism of the Armed Forces were present in Lula's speeches, considering his trajectory of struggle against the military regime and as a critic of previous governments that were more aligned with the Global North, his discourses and praxis emphasized the importance the of the Global South, strengthening the bonds of solidarity between them. Such components are organized, from the populist logic, in the form of discourse that demands the defense of the people understood (or named by the leader's speeches) as those who are marginalized because of their economic, sexual, or racial condition.

On the other hand, the characterization of right-wing populism in Brazil can be performed by the association between the above-listed conservative, nationalist, and neoliberal ideological components, as other research on this subject has stated (Alonso 2019; Solano 2018; Power and Rodrigues-Silveira 2018). Such components are also organized by the populist logic in a form of a discourse that claims the defense of the people, by the leader. Here, this subject is understood (or named) as those who felt intimidated by the rise of minorities or who felt, in some way, threatened by the welfare policies for the poor. In this ideological moisture, some elements dear to the liberal tradition lose centrality (indicated

in components "i", "j", and "m" in the list above), which are displaced by conservative components ("n", "o", "p", and "q") that form the normative core of the discursive performances of Jair Bolsonaro (Silva et al. 2021; Silva 2022). In the following sections, I will address this shift—from the liberal component, in favor of the conservative one—in the formation of Jair Bolsonaro's far-right ideology, observing how the populist framework has structured these ideological contents through an antagonist and Manichean formula.

## 4. Populism in the XXI Century in Brazil: A Dangerous Ambiguity

The concept of populism can be used as a marker for the transformations that Latin American thought and political praxis have gone through. Therefore, it is observed that, in its original moment, the term was used as a kind of photographic negative on which Marxists and Liberals[4] revealed their impressions on nationalist governments (Silva 2019). Stimulated by the opportunities created in times of war, this type of national developmentalism spread in the region, taking on several facets, such as the Argentine Juan Domingo Perón (1946–1955 and 1973–1974); the Chilean Carlos Ibáñez del Campo (1927–1931 and 1952–1958); the Brazilian Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945 and 1951–1954); the Mexican Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940); the Peruvian Fernando Bealúnde Terry (1963–1968 and 1980–1985); and the Ecuadorian José María Velasco Ibarra (1934–1935, 1944–1947, 1952–1956, 1960–1961 and 1968–1972)[5].

Gino Germani, Octavio Ianni, and Torcuato Di Tella (Germani et al. 1973) observe in the class alliance articulated by populist discourses an intermediate strategy between fascism and the bourgeois revolution. From this perspective, these leaders would have been able to overcome the limits determined by the mentality of landowners, agro-exporters, and other traditional oligarchies, achieving, to a greater or lesser extent, the strengthening of the internal market and the promotion of a protectionist trade policy to encourage industrialization through import substitution (Sachs 1989; Dornbusch and Edwards 1991). However, even though they come closer in economic terms, moving away from Marxist and liberal readings, this sociology of modernization takes different positions vis-à-vis the political developments of the nationalist regimes of the time, which are sometimes identified as decidedly authoritarian, as in Germani's interpretation, now, as Di Tella considered, as democracy was possible under those circumstances (Mitre 2008, pp. 10–17).

Moving forward in time, in the 1980s and 1990s, the controversy over the political consequences of populism loses significance for a set of considerations that address its economic effects. The preferred theme of these approaches is the "cursed inheritance" left by national-developmentalist governments (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991; Kaufman and Stallings 1991; Ducatenzeiler et al. 1993). Regarding the recession that took place in different Latin American countries during the 1980s and 1990s, it is observed that, given the imminent collapse of their economic systems, a consensus was formed between a portion of the national elites, their creditors, and multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank regarding the implementation of stabilization measures based on curbing fiscal spending and freezing wages.

At this moment, on the Latin American political horizon, it appears to be a group of leaders committed to this agenda, to be implemented through structural adjustment programs carried out with the assistance of the IMF. The main examples of the period are Carlos Menem, in Argentina (1989–1999), Fernando Collor de Mello, in Brazil (1990–92), and Alberto Fujimori, in Peru (1990–2000)[6].

"Economic populism" became an expression used to typify expansive monetary and fiscal policies, supported by the current availability of international reserves and the exchange rate overvaluation. This is what happened during the 1990s and the first decades of the 21st century in Latin America, when the concept was used to designate conservative and liberal leaders, configuring what has been called right-wing populism—a category that is currently gaining popularity, in particular in the designation of far-right governments[7].

*4.1. From Populism to Lulism*

Originally attracted by speeches focused on improving the living conditions of workers, the electoral rise of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, member and historic leader of PT, is set in a context marked by an economic and social crisis, introduced after the neoliberal wave that reached Brazil and Latin America in the final decades of the 20th century.

Shared by sections of the middle and popular classes that were particularly affected by the harmful consequences of the neoliberal attacks, the rejection of the austerity discourses manifested itself in different degrees. However, this populist wave, or *Pink Tide*, as it was typified[8], took on different tones.

In some countries, such as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, this wave assumed a spectrum of singular radicality (La Torre 2013), and in others, such dissatisfaction was more moderate, being mitigated by commitments to traditional elites, especially those identified with capital financial (Pereira da Silva 2015; Moreira et al. 2008). In these cases, notably in Brazil and Chile, the reversal of some austerity policies and the adoption of income transfer programs were the result of bargaining dynamics established at the level of civil society and its representative institutions (Lanzaro 2007).

In Brazil, this political subject is, therefore, the product of a link between heterogeneous elements formed by an equivalent dynamic that was engendered by the antagonism towards the political elites characterized as traditional, conservative, and/or associated with the neoliberal project (Silva et al. 2018, pp. 166–201). In other words, the political subject that precipitated the electoral rise of Lula was formed by the equivalent articulation of a heterogeneous set of social subjects: middle classes, popular classes, rural segments, urban segments, social movements, trade unions, churches, etc. (Singer 2015; Silva et al. 2018). This aggregation took place through the shared perception of exclusion by the hegemonic elite. These upper classes, from the discursive performances of Lula, were pointed to as the "enemy", responsible for the situation of oppression and for not meeting the demands directed by these social subjects to the State.

Therefore, according to our perception, based on the literature produced about the period (Singer 2013, 2015), the antagonism between oppressors and the oppressed produced by the performance of the leader was the original mechanism of formation of this social base, which allows the characterization of this phenomenon as populist (Laclau 2005). This antagonism was settled, in this particular case, as the opposition between rich and poor, workers and employers, but also between a myriad of demographic and non-demographic minorities who felt historically subjugated (women, LGBTQIA+, people from the north and northeast, indigenous people, etc.).

Nevertheless, using this very same theoretical framework, I argue that the changes recorded in the Workers' Party support base may be associated with an option made by the party, which concerns a change in the original strategy (the antagonism toward the elites) in favor of governmental performances directed to segments of the base of the economic pyramid[9], which, however, did not threaten elite interests (Silva et al. 2018, p. 169). Thus, our objective is to argue that the option chosen by the party leaders to concentrate efforts in a rational-legal administrative performance (in all embracing public policies) was carried out at the expense of populist performances, which would be characterized by strengthening the perception of a common enemy through the speeches of the leader. In order words, Lula and Dilma governments were centered in wide public policies not guided by the populist logic of polarization. Such policies have a moderated leftist ideological orientation and included direct transfers to the poor (See Singer 2009, 2012; Rennó and Cabello 2010) (Bolsa-Família), an important expansion of the superior educational system (Reuni, Prouni e Fies), subsidies to national companies, and affirmative action policies to benefit sexual, racial, and demographic minorities (Singer 2013; Silva et al. 2018)[10].

Despite the scope of these investments, these policies were not well received by the upper classes and other segments that did not feel covered by the public policies carried out by the government. In the sociological roots of *Lulism*, André Singer presents the most well-established interpretation of the period (Singer 2009). In this characterization, he describes

a discontinuity between the original social base of Partido dos Trabalhadores, marked by the heterogeneity of the social groups that constituted it (middle classes, ecclesiastical communities, social movements, and organized workers), and the segment that began to support the government from 2006: The so-called sub-proletariat (informal workers and/or earning a maximum of two minimum wages). The public policies of income distribution and stimulus to full employment have enabled the maintenance of popularity among workers with a monthly family income between zero and five minimum wages. However, the growth of its rejection among the richer part of the population was undeniable. This antipathy is even more noticeable from the presidential elections of 2010, when the Workers' Party was able to mobilize just 48% of the middle-class electorate as opposed to 68% in the 2002 election. Such a dynamic reached its apex in the electoral process that took shape in 2018, when the party had 21% support among this sector of the electorate. One of the factors to be observed about the desertion of the middle classes from Workers' Party electoral base can be found in the corruption cases, which strengthened the opposition parties through an anti-corruption rhetoric, having as its focus the Car Wash operation[11] and the ex-president Lula (Coelho and Silva 2020).

### 4.2. Equivalence and Difference: The Administrativist Option

Analyzing the process of articulating collective actors through the sharing of demands, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) differentiate them into two types: (i) popular demands give rise to equivalence chains in which social actors have their identity mitigated in favor of a common political subject and (ii) differential/democratic dynamics that are characterized by an affinity with a rational legal administration associated with a pluralist representation of different social actors whose identities do not dissolve in the formation of a collective subject, i.e., logic in tune with the principles, procedures, and liberal institutions (Silva 2022; Silva and Guedes 2021). They differ from the agonistic logic that underlies populism, as a form of representation that has a major bias, in which the idea of exclusion and oppression, despite a common enemy, remains the structural core (Laclau 2005; Balsa 2010). When they cannot be fulfilled by institutions, these demands and actors are articulated in a representative process established from the identification of these failures.

In the face of the hypothesis raised here—which points to the modification of the *populist* component that originally constituted the discourse of PT leaders—we aspire to argue that the conversion to an administrativist-differential (Balsa 2010, 2013) logic can be regarded as one explanatory factor of the electoral success of Jair Bolsonaro. In other words, the argument outlined here highlights the failure of PT's administrativist option and subsequent inability to meet, in a differential way, the demands directed to the State by the different social groups without threatening the upper classes. By putting aside populist rhetoric in favor of administrative logic, PT opened space for populist radicalization. In this radicalization, leftist-oriented public policies were blamed, leading to the dissemination of an antagonist discourse whose strong right-wing ideological content was unprecedented in the country (Silva et al. 2018; Silva and Guedes 2021).

The frustration of those expectations reached its apex during the events that became known as *Jornadas de Junho*, when a multitude of Brazilians took the streets of various cities in demonstrations whose plurality of actors and demands defy analysts to this day[12]. At this conjuncture, at the political-partisan level, elites who had joined PT's coalition in a pragmatical/opportunistic strategy—in view of its wide support in society—glimpsed the possibility of interrupting a government that was identified with a project oblivious to their values, being directed to the empowerment of social minorities and the poor. This is the case of hegemonic elites who were always uncomfortable with the egalitarian components of the discourses and praxis of Workers' Party leaders, even considering its moderate and limited character, in view of the option not to threaten the profits earned by them.

Such an interruption is orchestrated in two dimensions. In the political-partisan dimension, the movements in favor of the impeachment[13] began and grew while rumors of economic crisis and institutional paralysis were spread through the country, and the

executive agenda was blocked in the National Congress. In the social dimension, there were increases in the discomfort (and the resentment[14]) with social inclusion policies oriented to economic majorities or social minorities (demographic and non-demographic). Throughout this process, it is possible to observe the shaping of a new equivalence chain, now formed in opposition to the political symbols (PT and leftist leaders), ideas (inclusion, equality, solidarity), and social actors (minorities and poor) that formed the previous chain (Kalil 2018).

The result of this process can already be perceived in the general election of 2014. In this election, although PT was able to maintain itself in Presidency, we observed dehydration of their bases in the Legislative realm, in addition to the electoral success of candidates representing Conservative Parliamentary Fronts[15], in particular, those grouped under the acronym BBB: Bullet (identified with the public security agenda), Bible (religious, in particular, evangelical), and Bovines (identified with agribusiness) (Silva and Guedes 2021).

Leaving aside the populist rhetoric, Lula's and, mainly, Dilma Rousseff's governments invested in the strengthening of liberal institutions, emphasizing the ideological component through leftist-oriented public policies. Since those policies were incapable of contemplating all demands for inclusion, they created a mass of dissatisfied individuals who were instigated to blame PT and the left for their misfortunes. In my view, this was the factor that precipitated the rightist turn in the country. Populism was the operator of this change.

### 4.3. The Construction of the Myth

The political career of Jair Bolsonaro is not recent. The current president of Brazil joined political life in 1988, when he was expelled from the army accused of insubmission for salary reasons. In this same year, he ran for councilor of the city of Rio de Janeiro, supported by the Partido Democrata Cristão (PDC). After his brief passage through the City Council, Bolsonaro ran for the Federal Chamber, where he remained for over 27 years, between 1991 and 2018.

His political activity was never directly connected to a party. Throughout his seven terms, he was a member of different small and medium-sized parties, among them Partido Democrata Cristão (1989–1993), Partido Progressista Renovador (1993–1995), Partido Progressista Brasileiro (1995–2003), Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (2003–2005), Partido da Frente Liberal (2005), Partido Progressista (2005–2016), and Partido Social Cristão (2016–2017), until, finally, he joined Partido Social Liberal (2018–2019).

If the former captain had irregular behavior concerning his party affiliation, with respect to the approval of the electorate, his performance was relatively stable. In his first election for Federal Deputy (1990), Bolsonaro obtained 67.041 votes; in the second (1994), 111.927; in the third (1998), 102.893; in the fourth (2002), 88.940; in the fifth (2006), 99.700; and in the sixth (2010), 120.000. The deviation in his electoral performance curve is the election of 2014, when he obtained 464.572 votes, being the most-voted Congressman of Rio de Janeiro state and becoming one of the top-five most-voted federal deputies in the country (Silva et al., forthcoming).

Even considering this meteoric rise between 2010 and 2014, it is interesting to consider that Jair Bolsonaro won the most important position in Brazilian politics without ever having played a role in the Executive branch before. Excluding this last period (2014), it is possible to notice that his political career does not have great achievements.

In order to understand the rise of Bolsonaro, it is imperative, therefore, to comprehend the constellation of factors that assured him the potential to expand his electoral base and constitute a legion of supporters. It is in this dynamic that the original agenda (military) begins to share space with other demands to be articulated in the chain of equivalence formed in his discourse, whose nodal point is the opposition to the leftist ideas and leaders, associated with political and moral corruption, and the antagonism regarding PT (Gracino et al. 2021; Silva 2022, forthcoming)[16].

In a superficial analysis, we can grasp some attributes of this new political subject that is formed around Bolsonaro: This is a group identified with the symbols of the middle

and upper classes, which sees in conservative values in the nostalgia of the dictatorial regime[17], and in the reduction of the State, fundamental elements for the promotion of a model of family and country that suits them. It is a political discourse that presents itself in a populist framework with an openly and proud "far-right" orientation, in favor of a presumed majority, composed by the white heterosexual upper and middle-class individuals or by those that feel identified with them (Silva, forthcoming)[18]. Touched by Bolsonaro's Manichean rhetoric, these groups blame the empowerment of women, gays, indigenous people, and the poor for everything bad that happens in their lives (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2018)[E].

*4.4. Moral Conservatism and Economic Liberalism: The Old and the New in the Far-Right Discourses of Jair Bolsonaro*

Although he presents himself as Catholic, it is difficult to determine when Jair Bolsonaro became the preferred candidate of evangelicals, since this process of approximation seems to have been built gradually through the incorporation of a conservative moral agenda, centered on opposing public policies regarding gender issues, as well as against abortion and same-sex marriage. In 2011, when Brazilian Congress discussed the vote on the 122/2006 bill, also known as anti-homophobia law, Bolsonaro launched himself as one of the spokesmen of the conservative reaction.

It should be noted that there is an intimate relationship between the growing popularity of Bolsonaro and the discursive line he adopted. In Brazilian political history, there have not been any presidents elected by popular vote that could be directly identified as conservatives or radically right-wing (Lombardo et al. 2022). The high adherence of Christians, especially Protestants, to Bolsonaro's propaganda reveals the growing importance of an agenda associated with values identified as religious, traditional, and conservative. Still, it is important to highlight the important electoral role exercised by religious leaders, mostly of Pentecostal denomination within these social groups. Using their great prestige, they have enabled the spread of Bolsonaro's proposals by acting directly with their believers (Burity 2020, 2018; Burity and Machado 2006).

The construction of the equivalence chain around Jair Bolsonaro's speeches was operated by an aggregation process between demands from different (but conservative) social groups. First, it was the military and admirers of the dictatorship period, followed by other groups interested in a military or punitivist idea of public security. Then, religious and other conservative groups identified with positions contrary to the advancement of inclusive policies or other gender and sexual issues such as the legalization of drugs, abortion, or gay marriage (Gracino et al. 2021; Silva and Rodrigues 2021).

There is, however, an exception through which we are able to observe a rupture in Bolsonaro's trajectory: The economy. This can be understood as the last discursive movement as a congressman, and it marks the consolidation of his ambitions as a Presidential candidate. In this process, it contemplates the mutation of a corporatist representative of minority groups into a leader of the masses, and the most recent agenda to be incorporated in his discursive performance was the defense of economic orthodoxy. This allowed him to form a majority by winning the support of the economic elites and the middle classes interested in neoliberal reforms.

These processes occurred gradually, through signals made through relevant actors in this social segment. In this case, the appointment of Paulo Guedes as the future Minister of the Economy and author of the economic parts of his manifesto served to encourage engagement of the market and big-company CEOs. The relevance of Guedes in this scenario cannot be underestimated, as his economic training at the University of Chicago[19] and his affinity with the financial market represents a clear signal of alignment with the policies advocated by these sectors. It is interesting to note that this ideologically rightist movement fit the populist framework formed by the Manichean antagonism against the left and especially against PT.

Returning to the legislative trajectory of Jair Bolsonaro, it is possible to mark this economic turnover. For example, since 2003, in many of his speeches in the Deputy Chamber, he was firmly critical of the Social Security Reform supported by PT for being excessively draconian and orthodox. The criticisms of the excessive orthodox neoliberal positioning of the PT government were maintained until 2006, that is, between 2003 and 2006, criticisms against PT were made in opposition to a supposed conversion to the interests of the market and subsequent betrayal of interventionist promises. These positions are currently criticized by Bolsonaro, who, as President of the Republic, has pursued a pro-market agenda with drastic cuts in public policies and social rights. From 2004, this criticism began to be linked to the theme of corruption. Since then, Bolsonaro has initiated a process of radicalization of his attacks against PT, in which he combined the association of party members who participated in the guerrilla war against the dictatorship with compliments to the military for having managed to eradicate this communist threat.

In addition, Bolsonaro's speeches addressing his economic plan reveal a criticism of the "leftist ideological bias" by which PT would have led foreign policy. The same can be said about the distributive policies that are focused on the lower strata of the economic pyramid (unemployed, children, elderly, and people outside the economically active population), and, because of that, would have undermined the "real working class", as we see in Bolsonaro's speeches. From then on, he presented himself as a representative of this jeopardized majority. With this, we find a situation in which the five constitutive elements in the definition of populism mentioned above are present: (a) A Manichean moral cosmology; (b) perception of the people as a homogeneous and virtuous totality; and (c) opposition to an elite considered to be corrupt and savage (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a, 2017; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018, p. 3).

## 5. Final Remarks

In 2006, when Latin America was living its *Pink Tide*, Jorge Castañeda published an article in the US journal Foreign Affairs, in which he mourned the rise of left-wing leaders and divided them into two groups. He called those who governed "within a more or less orthodox market framework" social democratic (or "responsive to modernizing influences"), such as the Chilean president Michelle Bachelet, and "in a slightly lesser extent", the Brazilian Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Castañeda 2006, p. 35). Meanwhile, those who adopted a more radical discourse of confrontation with domestic and international elites, especially with regard to the United States, were typified as populist. Namely, in this regard, Castaneda refers to Hugo Chávez, "with his military background, Kirchner with his Peronist roots <and> Morales with his cocaleaf growers' militancy and agitprop" (*Idem*, p. 39).

I reject the purely pejorative definition of populism presented by Castañeda to criticize the radical left. In fact, I do not use the concept to designate a specific ideological content, since my purpose is to compare two leaders with different ideologies that could be framed in the concept of populism. This will be performed through a separation between what I called populist form and its different ideological contents. From the ideological axis, in which analysis was guided by the categories used by the CMP-MARPOR, we find in the discursive performances of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva a left-wing ideological content, and in those of Jair Bolsonaro, a right-wing one. The ideas of inclusion and exclusion complete this opposition, reinforcing its relationship with the demands for material and symbolic recognition by demographic and non-demographic minorities.

Nevertheless, in addition to the ideological-discursive plan, I proceeded with an analysis of their governmental performances, that is, their relationship with the other political elites, the Constitutional Powers, and the Public Administration. On this axis, the result also indicates obstacles in the symmetrical application of the concept of populism to both cases, since public policies and political alliances developed during Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's governments were not guided by rhetoric of antagonism nor by a Manichean or simplifying logic of the social fabric, which are characteristics of what I define here as

a populist form. On the contrary, it reinforced pluralism and the importance of liberal democratic institutions.

However, unlike Castañeda, and despite its tense relationship with liberal institutions, I do not believe that every populist political phenomenon is negative. That is why I believe that the concept can be used as a marker of the turning points in Latin American political thinking and praxis. This compass' function, capable of leading the observer on a journey through the labyrinthine paths of the subcontinent's political history, results from the sensitivity of the concept to the changing moods of the region, but also to the recurrence of some of its themes, such as personalism, multi classism, and the weakness of liberal institutions. Here, "populism" was, since the beginnings of the 20th century, associated with a structure in which civil society has little room for the exercise of autonomy, given the excessive concentration of economic resources and, consequently, political power, in the hands of local leaders interested in the maintenance of their power, and lacking further national projects.

One element present in the several reformulations of the concept is that, in Latin America, populism has historically been associated with a process of increasing the number of subjects able to participate in the polls (Barros 2017). However, this feature has not been emphasized as one of its constituent elements by its theorists that, on the contrary, claim populism as a concept able to analyze inclusion and exclusion processes and movements, left-wing and right-wing government (Laclau 2005; Mudde 2007). This, in my view, is a problem as it increases the ambiguity of the concept and reduces its explanatory potential, as I have argued in other work (Silva 2019).

This gap made room for theoretical reformulations that, ignoring this redistributive and inclusive history, contributed to overstretching the concept, through its association with leaders that foster the exclusion of specific social groups or endorse the restriction of their rights, such as conservative, xenophobic, or neoliberal leaderships, commonly typified as right-wing populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013b).

Nevertheless, by incorporating a binary and polarizing logic, populism might flatten the plurality of identities that make up the societal fabric, homogenizing the different groups through the binomial us vs. them perspective. In this kind of discourse, the underlying enemy could be the representative system itself, with regard to pluralism and respect for minorities (Urbinati 2014; Silva and Adinolfi 2018). Therefore, one of the elements part of this interpretation of populism is a horizon of hostility to liberalism and the principles of "constitutional democracy" (impersonality, pluralism, division of powers, rights of minorities, etc.).

Right-wing populism in the Bolsonaro era follows such trends. Its operation is not limited to the (re)configuration of the identity ties between representatives and citizens. It presupposes, once in power, the drive to make institutional changes in order to increase the centralization of powers in the hands of the leader and his followers. It is at this point that Urbinati's considerations become particularly useful for our argument, which aims to use the concept to characterize the rise and rule of Jair Bolsonaro.

Therefore, if populist reason continues to operate after the electoral rise of leadership, it would imply a political praxis aimed at circumventing the obstacles to the implementation of the will of the majority, represented in the figure of the leader. For this reason, populism would be associated with the alteration of the institutional forms of liberal democracy through reforms that seek changes in the electoral system to facilitate the permanence of the leader in power, an increase in the competences of the Executive, favoring of majority dynamics in Parliament, and, finally, the approval of direct democracy mechanisms such as plebiscites and referendums (Urbinati 2014; Silva and Adinolfi 2018). Regarding the moral/moralist agenda about women's rights and gender equality, this kind of populism, at this point, might summon female leaders and co-opt them in the discursive radicalization against minorities and women themselves. On the other hand, these movements may stir up action and feminist reactions against right-wing populism in Parliament and on the streets.

Notwithstanding what I wanted to argue in this article is that these elements were not present in the PT governments, which, in my view, are wrongly typified as populist. Although at some initial moment their leaders used a rhetoric of antagonism, their governments were characterized by an administrative/differential logic, that differs from the populist one, since it implies respect for the independence of the liberal institutions and the strengthening of pluralism, reinforced by policies of inclusion directed to different social groups and collective actors such as woman, LGBTQIA+, indigenous people, and other oppressed demographic or non-demographic minorities.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** https://ppgcs.ufrrj.br/laboratorios-de-pesquisa/lappcom/ (accessed on 22 November 2021).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

[1] As explained by Roger Eatwell, right populism should be seen as a global phenomenon, challenging liberal democracies; "Brexit and Trump actually followed the much longer rise of national populists across Europe, such as Marine Le Pen in France, Matteo Salvini in Italy and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. They are part of a growing revolt against mainstream politics and liberal values", (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, p. 169).

[2] In CMP's code handbook, the categories are: 103—Anti-imperialism: positive, 105—Military: Negative, 106—Peace, 107—Internationalism: Positive, 202—Democracy, 403—Market Regulation, 404—Economic Planning, 406—Protectionism: Positive, 412—Controlled Economy, 413—Nationalisation, 504—Welfare State Expansion, 506—Education Expansion e, finalmente, 701—Labour Groups: Positive (Werner et al. 2014; Budge and Meyer 2013; Jorge et al. 2018).

[3] In CMP's code handbook, the categories are: 104—Military: Positive, 201—Freedom and Human Rights: Positive, 203—Constitutionalism: Positive, 305—Political Authority: Positive, 401—Free Market Economy, 402— Incentives: Positive, 407—Protectionism: Negative, 414—Economic Orthodoxy, 505—Welfare State Limitation, 601—National Way of Life: Positive, 603—Traditional Morality: Positive, 605—Law and Order, e, por fim, 606—Civic Mindedness: Positive (Werner et al. 2014; Budge and Meyer 2013; Lombardo et al. 2020).

[4] Among many references, we highlight the contributions of Weffort (1968) and Cardoso and Faletto (1971) as an example of the Marxist critique of populism. Among liberals, on the other hand, I would like to highlight O'Donnell (1972) and Bresser-Pereira (1991).

[5] For a thorough historiography, see: Ianni (1975) and Vilas (1994).

[6] Regarding the first neoliberal wave of populism in Latin America, see: Roberts (1995); Weyland (2003).

[7] Regarding the mobilization of the concept of populism to characterize right-wing and extreme-right leaders, see: Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013b); Betz (1994).

[8] Regarding the "*Pink Tide*" in Latin America see: Toledo and Braga (2016); Pereira da Silva (2015); Author and reference has been omitted for peer review (Castañeda 2006; Panizza 2006).

[9] Regarding the role of the "new middle class" in this conformation, we highlight the important research conducted by Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco (2018) on the dynamics of resignification that affected social groups that had greater access to consumption and education throughout PT administrations. However, once the demands continue appearing and the inclusion processes cannot handle all of them, this "new middle class", however, became critical of the public policies that benefited them.

[10] In this regard, it is worth mentioning the impact of the Bolsa Família Program (PBF), which, in the period in question, had its budget multiplied by thirteen, reaching more than 11.4 million families in 2008. However, the most important public policy of the period was the real increase in the minimum wage that had a broader impact than the PBF (Singer 2009, pp. 91–92).

[11] Beginning in March 2014, the operation is carried out by the Brazilian Federal Police and aims to investigate money laundering and corruption schemes involving members of state-owned companies, politicians, and private sector entrepreneurs.

[12] Regarding the period see: Singer (2013).

[13] The process of impeachment began in December 2015. The ex-President Dilma Rousseff was temporarily removed from her position in May 2016 and, permanently, in August of the same year.

14　Regarding the role of resentment in the rise of right-wing populisms in general see Betz (1990) and in the particular case of Jair Bolsonaro see: (Silva 2022).

15　According to the determination of the National Congress Directing Act number 69, of 10 November 2005, the Parliamentary Front is considered the suprapartisan association of at least one-third of the members of the Federal Legislative Power, intended to promote the improvement of the federal legislation on a particular sector of society. See in: https://www.camara.leg.br/internet/deputado/frentes.asp, acessed in 14 July 2021.

16　In the words of Jair Bolsonaro in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies: "I want to thank Lula, who in all his movements has mentioned my name as a great enemy of PT. I'm very proud of that." Available in: https://bit.ly/2WNMvZI, accessed on 4 January 2022.

17　In the words of Jair Bolsonaro in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies: "If not being a traitor means being a right-winger. I am proud to say that I defend the military dictatorship." Available in: https://bit.ly/2EVLLYl, accessed on 4 January 2022.

18　In the words of Jair Bolsonaro in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies: "Why does PT hate the middle class so much, who survives at their own expense and do not depend on the Government at all?". Available in: https://bit.ly/2WGNFpW, accessed on 4 January 2022.

19　The University of Chicago is internationally recognized as one of the cradles of economic neoliberalism, having played a fundamental role in economic restructuring and policy developments in Chile at the beginning of the decade of 1980.

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