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# 15

## “ENFRENTAR VÍRUS COMO HOMEM”

### Bolsonaro’s Populism and Performing Hegemonic Masculinity during the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Théo Aiolfi and Giulia Champion*

#### Introduction

On March 30, 2020, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro adopted a defiant stance against the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic by choosing to walk the streets of Brasília. In stark contrast with the rising number of countries that had enforced national or regional lockdowns to prevent the spread of the virus, Bolsonaro met citizens in the open and without a mask, shaking hands and taking pictures as he conveyed the message that the virus should not worry Brazilian citizens and urged them to keep the economy going. Stopping in front of a small crowd, he started an impromptu speech in which he combined strength, masculinity, and a form of fatalism: “*Essa é uma realidade, o vírus tá aí. Vamos ter que enfrentá-lo, mas enfrentar como homem, porra. Não como um moleque. Vamos enfrentar o vírus como a realidade. É a vida. Todos nós iremos morrer um dia*” (BBC News Brasil 2020).<sup>1</sup>

This quote, which was the first of many outrageous and polarizing statements uttered by Bolsonaro during the pandemic, conveys his stance and shares his conviction that the upcoming health crisis was nothing more than a minor challenge to the Brazilian people that could be overcome provided we faced the virus “like men”. Although this quote could be interpreted as a desperate last-minute attempt to justify the lack of preventive measures, its salience becomes more apparent when it is analyzed in the wider context of Brazilian politics and society, as well as that of the global rise of populism (Moffitt 2016). As such, the purpose of this chapter is to examine Bolsonaro’s rhetorical response to the COVID-19 pandemic, notably his references to hegemonic masculinity, and discuss how they are best understood as idiosyncratic expressions of the populist style. Adopting a performative approach to populism, we focus more specifically on how Bolsonaro articulated his relationship with the Brazilian people during the pandemic through an analysis of various

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political performances. By discussing Bolsonaro's performances in the local context of Brazil, we argue that his reliance on a hypermasculine *ethos* became even more prominent with the emergence of a health crisis that defied his nationalist and reactionary ideology.

In this chapter, we explore the intersection between Brazilian nationalism, populism, and hegemonic masculinity during the COVID-19 pandemic. We begin with a theoretical discussion of populism and performances of national identity, focusing specifically on the triadic articulation between the people, the elite, and the populist leader. Applying this framework to Brazilian politics, we then discuss the rise of Jair Bolsonaro, arguing that his "representative claim" (Saward 2010) to embody the Brazilian people is explained by two factors. First, the contemporary representation crisis brought about by the *Operação Lava Jato* ("Carwash Operation") scandal, which provided him with an elite to oppose. And second, by his choice to depict "the people" through a revival of deeper national narratives that dominated the dictatorship period (1964–1985), such as Gilberto Freyre's racial democracy and lusotropicalism concepts and the notion that the Brazilian army is a fundamental defender of Brazilian identity. After this discussion, we then focus on his performances of self as a populist leader, highlighting his reliance on hegemonic masculinity as a projection of strength and health, and the mirror association of femininity and queerness with weakness.

Connecting these theoretical discussions to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we then move on to an empirical analysis of four political performances conducted by Bolsonaro at various stages of the health crisis. Developing the specific way this co-constitutive articulation of the people and the populist leader was produced during the pandemic, we will particularly emphasize his infantilization of the people, linking it with the paternalism of previous Brazilian politicians such as Getúlio Vargas (President of Brazil from 1930 to 1945 and 1951 to 1954) and military leaders during the dictatorship. Lastly, by situating Bolsonaro's brand of populism in a history of uneven and unequal developments across gender, race, and class in a vast and complex country such as Brazil, we conclude this chapter by considering the influence of populism in the country. Discussing its strategic use to revitalize a reactionary form of nationalism, we argue that Bolsonaro's extreme reliance on the rhetoric of a masculinity crisis can be accounted for by his inability to react to an unprecedented health crisis that the lens of reactionary nationalism could not otherwise capture.

### **The Populist Style and Performances of Identity: Performing the People, the Elite, and the Populist Leader**

Even if academic, political, and mediatic discourses on populism have resurged in Europe and the United States, particularly after the twin shocks in 2016 with the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the vote in favor of Brexit in the United Kingdom, the concept has particular resonance within the Latin

American context. Indeed, Latin America was described by De la Torre (2017, 195) as "the land of populism" because "from the 1930s and 1940s until the present, populist leaders have dominated the region's political landscapes" with the phenomenon taking multiple forms, which he described as classical populism, neoliberal populism, and radical populism. Despite its national specificities, Brazil is no exception to this recurring presence of populism, with examples of prominent politicians embracing the first two types found in, respectively, Getúlio Vargas and Fernando Collor de Mello (President of Brazil from 1990 to 1992). However, the case of Bolsonaro is qualitatively different from these three forms of populism, bearing more similarity with the nativist type of populism prevalent in Europe (Mudde 2007). But outside of these typological endeavors, the prominence of populism as a phenomenon in Latin America has led to the emergence of a rich theoretical literature spearheaded by the work of Laclau (2005), whose critical and holistic approach to populism serves as the main theoretical inspiration behind the conception of populism used in this chapter.

More specifically, this chapter places itself in the recent collective effort to bring together a "post-Laclauian approach to populism" (Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2021, 8). This bears a threefold consideration. Firstly, this chapter is informed by a commitment to avoid normative judgment *vis-à-vis* populism. Inspired by the growing literature on anti-populism (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2019), unlike authors such as Müller (2016) or Norris and Inglehart (2019) who embrace the more or less explicit premise that populism is a potential threat to democracy, we do not assume that populism is automatically associated with illiberalism and/or anti-pluralism. Secondly, this chapter challenges the notion that populism is a set of ideas and beliefs or an ideology, regardless of how "thin-centered" (Mudde 2004, 544) it might be, but instead argues that populism is better understood as a way of doing politics. Taking inspiration from Laclau, this shifts the theoretical focus from populism as a phenomenon that exists *a priori*, toward a conception of populism as something being done and enacted. This shift emphasizes the importance of making a distinction between substance and form. More specifically, this means acknowledging that the ideological "content" put forward by a political actor should be analytically separated from the way this content is being articulated, even though there are practically interconnected as form and substance continually shape each other.

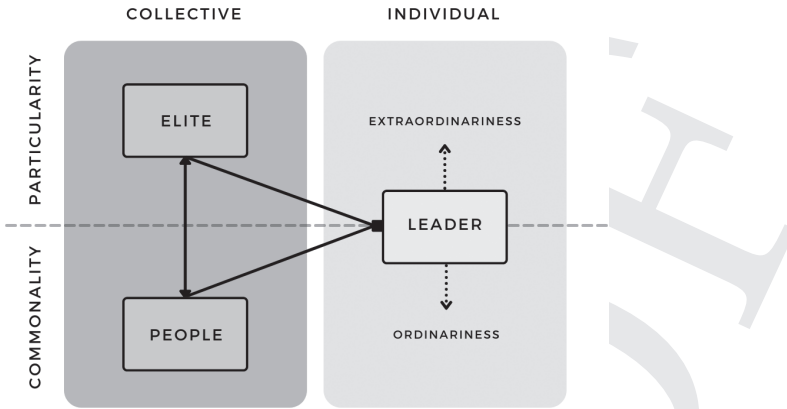
Thirdly, this chapter embraces what has been called "the performative turn in the study of populism" (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021, 49). In a natural extension of the aforementioned argument that populism is something that is being done and enacted, this practically entails an engagement with the two interconnected concepts of performance and performativity. In short, these concepts operate symbiotically: performances constitute the site in which performativity comes into action while performativity expresses the ontological effects that performances create. In the case of populism, this dynamic operates through the populist leader who does not "speak to or for some pre-existing 'people' but arguably bring[s]

the subject known as ‘the people’ into being through the process of naming, performance or articulation” (Moffitt 2016, 24), a conception which finds its roots in Laclau’s (2005, 103) work.

In the context of this performative and critical approach to populism, we define populism as a political style, that is an open-ended repertoire of political performances made up of three major performative clusters, adapted from the work of Moffitt (2016, 45). The first one includes performances of transgression, understood as “the violation of a norm of political relevance, whether that norm is directly political, socio-cultural, ethical, legal and so on” (Aiolfi, 2022, 6). The second cluster of the populist style is made up of performances of crisis, that is the symbolic articulation that the society is undergoing a crisis requiring urgent action. The third performative cluster, which is the central focus of this chapter, is the performance of identity. Broadly defined as the social construction of what makes a group or individual distinctive from others, the concept of identity as it is used in this chapter is influenced by post-structural understandings of the concept, notably the influential work of Derrida (1978). What that implies is an anti-essentialist stance on identity, which does not refer here to a form of preexisting essence that would intrinsically characterize someone or something. Instead, identity is framed for the purpose of this work as an unstable and relational concept that is always spatially and temporally situated as well as performatively constructed. Furthermore, identity is about drawing a boundary between what is self and what is not. It is hence ontologically produced through the simultaneous and complementary “processes of linking and differentiation” (Hansen 2013, 17): linking disparate features into an apparently cohesive whole and differentiating self through the contrasting figure of the other(s) who do(es) not share these characteristics.

Although identity is arguably part of the performative repertoire of every political actor, what makes populist performances of identity different from others is that they simultaneously constitute two forms of identity: on the one hand, they present politics as an antagonistic opposition between the people and the elite (Laclau 2005, 160); on the other hand, they ground this collective claim to represent the people into the embodied performance of an individual, the populist leader who must tread the subtle tightrope between performing ordinariness and extraordinariness (Moffitt 2016, 52). In order to develop more visually the way populist performances of identity operate, we offer here a schematic representation (Figure 15.1) of the three co-constitutive elements performatively constructed in a populist performance: the people, the elite, and the leader, which constitute the “triad of populist representation” (Casullo 2021, 77).

These elements distinguish themselves from each other depending on whether they rely on collective performances of identity aggregating a large group of individuals, such as the elite and the people, or whether they are articulated as individual performances of self, as is the case for the identity of the populist leader. Furthermore, they are also separated depending on whether they rely on performing commonalities, such as the people, particularity, such as the elite, or a



**FIGURE 15.1** Bolsonaro's Collective Performances of the Political Elite and the Brazilian People

hybrid combination of both, as is the case for the leader. In this perspective, "the people" is articulated through collective performances of identity relying on commonality, emphasizing common traits between not only members of the group but more generally with the deep systemic sociocultural resources shared within the political community where the performance takes place.

Placed in opposition and an antagonistic relationship to the people, "the elite" is also constructed through collective performances of identity, but its articulation emphasizes particularity, that is characteristics that set this group apart from the rest of society. People and the elite in the populist framework are thus in tension, which is represented here with a double arrow, co-constituting each other in reference to what the other is not. The final piece in this puzzle that ties them all together is the performative role of the leader whose performance of self is hybrid, combining and balancing references to commonality and particularity. This hybridity of the performance is produced because of the need for the populist leader to simultaneously show his proximity with the people that he claims to represent, showing that he is "one of us" through references to commonality, while also justifying his leadership position by making the case for his own exceptionality. Doing too much of the former would destabilize his role as the central point of identification for the people. Doing too much of the latter would distance him from the people and associate him with the elite whom he has sworn to fight. This tension between ordinariness and extraordinariness (Moffitt 2016, 52) is also represented here by a double arrow and justifies the position of the leader in between references to commonality and particularity.

Exhaustively applying this theoretical framework to the case of Jair Bolsonaro would be an endeavor far beyond the scope of a single chapter, which is why we have decided to primarily focus on performances of identity. While the other

performative clusters of transgression and crisis are also central to Bolsonaro's style, we have chosen to specifically address the relationship between people and the leader to highlight several salient features that best capture the way he (mis) handled the COVID-19 pandemic.

After he was elected president of Brazil in 2018, the success of his claim to represent the Brazilian people (Saward 2010) was incontestable and became institutionally solidified. However, we argue that the meteoric rise of this former military officer and career politician who was a federal deputy in the *Câmara dos Deputados*, the lower house of the National Congress of Brazil, since 1990 can be accounted for by a combination of two factors that were channeled through his populist performances of collective identity. The first factor was the contemporary crisis of representative politics in Brazil, most particularly of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT, "Workers' Party"), which was set in motion by the *Operação Lava Jato* in 2014, a money laundering inquiry that turned into a criminal investigation. Its findings highlighted systematic corruption involving a wide number of established politicians, including former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who was indicted and jailed in 2018.

Although *Lava Jato* can be seen as "inquisitorial" and "controversial" because it gave "arbitrary power to individual judges", it also reflected the fact that "tolerance of corruption has declined and accountability institutions have been strengthened in Brazil" (Pereira 2020, 88). Regardless of the debates about the legitimacy of the investigation and its legal consequences, *Lava Jato* completely reshuffled the cards of Brazilian politics, bringing popular discredit to much of the political establishment, most notably the PT which had dominated Brazilian politics for 13 years. The party's fall from grace reached its peak in 2016 with the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, Lula Da Silva's hand-picked successor, and the subsequent 2018 elections in which Lula himself could not run and the PT had to nominate Fernando Haddad, the former mayor of São Paulo, as a last-minute replacement who could not replicate his popularity (Gontijo and Ramos 2019, 10). Even if *Lava Jato* marked the legal apex of the antiestablishment wave that unseated the PT, Pereira (2020, 86) highlights that the roots of this resentment can be traced back to national protests in 2013 that were not only "the largest in a generation" but also the signal of "the existence of a wide gap in trust between Brazilian citizens and their elected representatives".

In addition to the short-term strategic benefits of clearing the electoral field of prominent rivals, what *Lava Jato* and the impeachment of Rousseff offered Bolsonaro was the perfect opportunity to build the narrative of a corrupt elite that had failed the Brazilian people. Even if the investigation also indicted members of the economic elite, it was political leaders, whose legitimacy directly depended on the approval of those they claim to represent, who were particularly affected by the antiestablishment feelings provoked by *Lava Jato*. Although Bolsonaro was not the only politician who could have made tactical use of the increasing resentment against the political elite, his position as an insider-outsider in the Chamber

of Deputies provided him with a comparative advantage. Indeed, as a member at the time of the Social Liberal Party (PSL, "*Partido Social Liberal*"), a marginal party that never made any compromises with the government, Bolsonaro did not suffer from the impact of the scandal.

Although this position came to him through circumstances and not because of a prior tactical choice, Bolsonaro found himself in a hybrid position between ordinariness and extraordinariness, a marginal politician hitherto (in)famous for his transgressive speeches on the military and gender-related polemics (Mendonça and Caetano 2020, 219) who had managed to maintain his political capital and legitimacy despite the crisis of representation. In other words, although his earlier critique of the elite might have fallen on deaf ears, the *Lava Jato* scandal provided Bolsonaro's negative representation of the political elite with an ideal resonance. Unsurprisingly, he took the opportunity by publicly showing his scorn for PT politicians whom he repeatedly called "communists", particularly during the impeachment and the following campaign. For instance, on the day that Rousseff learned of the formal start of the process, Bolsonaro, accompanied by his son Eduardo, held a banner that read "*O Brasil não aguenta mais você. Cai fora*" (Benites 2016).<sup>2</sup> And as he cast his vote in favor of Rousseff's impeachment, Bolsonaro dedicated it to Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, the most infamous torturer of the military dictatorship (1964–1985), claiming that "They [the left] lost in 1964, they lost now in 2016". Gontijo and Ramos (2019, 6) described this parallel as establishing the "parliamentary coup of 2016" as a "parody" of the military coup of 1964.

This nostalgic throwback to the military era is part of the second factor that constituted Bolsonaro's performances of idea: his choice to depict "the people" reviving deeper national narratives prevalent during dictatorship in the country. Indeed, framing the elite as corrupt is not enough to imbue one's collective performances of identity with the populist style, as the elite is only one of the two sides of the populist way of framing politics. Nonetheless, while Bolsonaro only managed to find an echo for his antiestablishment rhetoric with the propitious context of the *Lava Jato* scandal, his depiction of the people resonated with much deeper narratives that he had been advocating since the beginning of his political career. Blending nationalism with religious conservatism and a fervent defense of the military dictatorship, Bolsonaro's far-right ideological stance bore numerous similarities with other right-wing populist leaders.

However, Bolsonaro's "religious nationalism" (Pereira 2020, 112) differed from the racially exclusive nativism of Western populism in its choice to echo Gilberto Freyre's myth of Brazil as a "racial democracy", that is a country whose strength lay in the *miscigenação* ("miscegenation") of its population. Indeed, "during the election and throughout the first months of his government, Bolsonaro has gone on the offensive to deny the existence of racism in Brazil" (Alfonso 2019, 45), claiming to be color-blind regarding race issues that should be subsumed within *brasilidade* ("Brazilianness"). Beyond the limitations of this foundational



myth of Brazil, Alfonso demonstrated that Bolsonaro's commitment to "racial democracy" was extremely shallow and opportunistic, praising some racial minorities such as the Japanese as "a dignified race" while repeatedly attacking Afro-Brazilian communities. However, regardless of his actual convictions on the matter, Bolsonaro's choice to pay lip service to the myth of "racial democracy" not only downplayed accusations of racism, but also allowed him to adopt another related concept developed by Freyre: lusotropicalism, or the notion that Brazilian people have a distinctive trait they inherited from Portuguese imperialism. Through references to a form of Brazilian specificity, Bolsonaro then reinforces a narrative of Brazilian exceptionalism that is coupled with his discourse of "the people".

As Burke has noted,

one important characteristic of Freyre's way of thinking was his love of setting up binary oppositions such as *casa-grande* ("big farmhouse" of the masters) and *senzala* ("slave quarters"), or "order" and "progress", only to undermine these oppositions by stressing what he liked to call mixing or "interpenetration". Freyre liked to return to the concept of *mestiçagem*, to play with it or, as he would say, to dance with it, pushing it to see how far it would go.

2011, 70

This type of binary thinking was steeped in a foreign understanding and hierarchization of the world, as Burke explains throughout his piece. This type of dynamic is not unique to Freyre and different forms of it can be found, including in the cannibalization of European culture described in Brazilian modernism and *Antropofagia* movements<sup>3</sup> (Schiess and Champion 2022).

In the world of Brazilian politics, as Ribeiro (2020) argued, Getúlio Vargas himself adopted a number of Freyre's articulations of Brazil and in particular, the notion discussed above of the nation as a "racial democracy". Hence, perpetuating the (mis-)understanding of *mestiçagem* that appeared to be a positive hybridity when it was a racist construct containing anxieties over miscegenation and translating Brazil's structural and systemic inequalities:

With the international media buying into the "racial democracy" discourse, it is no wonder that the election of President Bolsonaro in Brazil – openly intolerant towards women, the downtrodden, and different ethnicities and sexual orientations – took the world by surprise. It served as a partial wake-up call that decades of denying racism in the country that received the most slaves during the Atlantic slave trade only abolished slavery in 1888, and never had a Civil Rights Movement may have somehow facilitated Bolsonaro's election.

Ribeiro 2020

However, even if one can doubt Bolsonaro's sincerity regarding Brazil as a racial democracy, his performances toward "the people" were also characterized by the centrality of two signifiers: the army and the nation. The use of the army was highlighted, for instance, in Bolsonaro's comments in April 2018 after the murder of two members of the Afro-Brazilian community: "The army did not kill anyone. The army belongs to the people. We cannot accuse the people of murder" (cited in Alfonso 2019, 44). This quote demonstrated a deliberate attempt to frame the army as being more than a protector of the people, but as the people themselves. This, in turn, helped it avoid accountability, elevated its symbolic legitimacy, and demonstrates Bolsonaro's nostalgic and reactionary longing for the military dictatorship. The association between people and nation was even more prominent and had an affinity with other nationalist forms of populism.

As argued by Anastasiou (2019, 1), this prominence reveals the subordinated position of the empty signifier of the people in right-wing populism which is "parasitically signified *vis-à-vis* the hegemonic signifier 'the nation'" whose ideological messages both subsume and replace it. However, the choice to use "the people" as a signifier and functionally as a synonym for "the nation" is strategic. Unlike the concept of nation, which is heavily associated with right-wing rhetoric, the empty signifier of the people is for nationalist politicians like Bolsonaro an attractive alternative with less ideological baggage that allows them to present their ideas with a new "coat of pain". More than an empty concept, "the people" is associated with the notion of popular will and is hence imbued with democratic authority. Unlike the nation, whose political defense may appear arbitrary and disconnected from electoral reality by relying on symbolism, "the people" additionally offers both materiality and legitimacy to political actors who claim to represent it. Furthermore, as was argued by De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017), the verticality of the frame of the people is complimentary with nationalism's horizontality. This discursively implies the ability to identify one's cause with that of the underdog and the powerless, a positive connotation that can be combined with a horizontal fight against foreign influences by associating the oppressive elite with threatening others. These advantages account for Bolsonaro's choice to project his nationalist discourse through the populist lens, as a way to offer a modernized version of his ideology without leaving himself or his followers open to accusations of xenophobia or racism.

### **Bolsonaro's Individual Performances of Self as a Masculine Populist Leader during COVID-19**

As was already mentioned in the previous section, the collective articulations between the people and the elite are crystallized through the embodied performance of the populist leader. However, although populism is characterized by a representative claim *vis-à-vis* the people, it does not build its symbolic power on "descriptive representation" (Pitkin 1972, 11) or "mirror representation" (Diehl

2017), that is on accurately reflecting the character of the people, but instead is what Casullo (2021) described as “synecdochical representation”. Just like a synecdoche, whereby a part is used to describe a totality, this form of representation implies strategically choosing one part of self to portray the whole constituency while keeping the others as completely different from the object that is represented. Quoting Casullo at length:

Similarity between representative and represented is a necessary but not sufficient element in populist representation. [...] A representative must resemble their constituents. In some respects but must be completely unlike them in others. I call the process by which some elements of “likeness” are selected, and others ignored “synecdochical representation”. [...] The leader resembles the people only partially, and only in those aspects that the leader has chosen as signifiers. And more crucially, the leader *does not* resemble the people in other crucial aspects, because she is judged to be exceptional and charismatic by her followers.

*Casullo 2021, 78*

What matters when considering Bolsonaro’s individual performances is highlighting his hybridity between ordinariness and extraordinariness, how it takes shape in his style, and why he chooses to highlight specific facets of his *persona*. Mendonça and Caetano (2020, 212) have convincingly argued that “Bolsonaro’s visual self-representation is deeply marked by eccentricity and ordinariness, which makes his demeanor, his body, and his appropriation of institutional power function as a series of parodies”. More than this,

while stripping the presidency from its extraordinary dimension, the parody paradoxically does something extraordinary by re-establishing the distance it sought to eliminate. Bolsonaro’s eccentric rejection of basic social standards, over-the-top masculinity, and impromptu use of everyday objects as props work to construct an image that he is just an ordinary man, extraordinarily occupying the presidency.

*Mendonça and Caetano 2020, 212*

Among the features Mendonça and Caetano (2020) highlighted, we argue that the most prominent dimension in his performance of self, which was even more salient during the COVID-19 pandemic, lies in reliance on hegemonic masculinity, which is the main focus of this chapter’s last section. Indeed, particularly at a time when the Brazilian people were physically affected by the virus, Bolsonaro chose to rely on hegemonic masculinity as a way to project strength and health. Understood as the dominant conventions and beliefs related to masculinity in a specific society, this concept coined by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) allows us to not only highlight the ideological roots in conservatism and nationalism of

Bolsonaro's hypermasculine framing of self, but also interrogate the idiosyncrasies of masculinity in the context of a postcolonial country such as Brazil.

A particularly noteworthy characteristic of Bolsonaro's performance of masculinity is that it allows him to convey both aspects of the hybridity between ordinariness and extraordinariness, a point showcased by Assumpção (2020, 11) when considering the semiotics of various pictures that he posted on Facebook. She showed that references to signifiers of masculinity like football allowed him to appear ordinary and connected with the passions of the Brazilian people, adding that portraying himself as a "caregiver and family leader" and his wife as "supportive" was a way to showcase his ordinary life while reinforcing traditional gender roles. Conversely, she showed that masculinity was associated with power and authority, as was exemplified by his frequent choice to appear in a suit or associated with other Western strongmen, notably Trump. Nonetheless, as we focus on the COVID-19 crisis, we have chosen for this chapter to engage with another use of hegemonic masculinity in Bolsonaro's performance, concentrating on his framing of the self as a father figure and the converse infantilization of the Brazilian people. To do so, we have zoomed in on four public performances<sup>4</sup> particularly salient and representative of his style to offer an in-depth case study of his way of projecting power through hegemonic masculinity at various stages of the pandemic, and conversely highlight the mirror association of femininity and queerness with weakness.

Bolsonaro's descriptions of the virus in public appearances and official governmental messages continually mobilized rhetoric pertaining to hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing his image as a "strong paternal figure" and framing the people, in particular the Brazilians who took the virus seriously, fell sick, or criticized his disastrous management of the pandemic as capricious and weak children. His infantilization of the Brazilian people was accompanied by a minimization of the pandemic realities and a dismissal of fear and rationality by discursively associating femininity and queerness with weakness. In this section of the chapter, we argue that this rhetoric was built on the development of a racist and heteronormative discourse in Brazil based on and building on Gilberto Freyre's framing of the nation in his writings as well as previous Brazilian populist gender discourse, in particular those deployed by Brazilian presidents Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945, 1951–1954) and Juscelino Kubitschek (1956–1961).

Going back to the discussion above of Bolsonaro's superficial embrace of the myth that Brazil is a "racial democracy", another specificity of his use of masculinity could be found in the way he intertwined traditional forms of masculinity with the empty signifiers of *mestiçagem* and hybridity in different circumstances, most notably during his speech delivered during the G20 summit in 2020:

Brazil has a diverse culture, which is unique among nations. We are a miscegenated people. Whites, blacks, and Indians have built the body and

spirit of a rich and wonderful people. In a single Brazilian family, we may contemplate greater diversity than we would in countries taken as a whole.

*Bolsonaro 2020a*

The use of the term “family” in particular played a critical role in most of Bolsonaro’s populist gendered rhetoric. Indeed, in what Gabriel Funari (2022, 413) aptly describes as “a five-minute rant filled with expletives”, Bolsonaro’s criticism of state and municipal authorities’ imposition of lockdown measures, the president noted his desire to arm the population to fight against these measures and identified family, along with other elements, to be one of his most fundamental values: “*Quem não aceitar a minha, as minhas bandeiras (...) família, Deus, Brasil, armamento, liberdade de expressão, livre mercado. Quem não aceitar isso, está no governo errado*” (Grillo 2020).<sup>5</sup> Bolsonaro’s *bandeiras* (flags),<sup>6</sup> as listed in the quote above, were all neatly organized around a patriarchal understanding of the world in which heteronormativity and the nuclear family are central. Moreover, the fact that Bolsonaro associates his political opponents with dictatorships seems ironic. We can also see how Bolsonaro’s populism is close to those of Vargas and Kubitschek as they also tailored their central policies around the family unit. As Wolfe argued in relation to Vargas, the “nuclear family was the central organizing trope for the populism that was to shape Vargas’s new Brazil. He fashioned himself the ‘father of the poor’” (2010, 92).

This paternal relation to the people can be seen in Bolsonaro’s engagement with the Brazilian public, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as he infantilized the people through various rhetorical strategies. For example, he called people who feared falling sick *as brats* (“*moleque*”) and not being adult men (“*homem*”), as shown in the quote giving in this chapter’s title. Furthermore, Bolsonaro repeatedly encouraged the public to “face the virus” or “face our problems”, minimizing the pandemic itself by describing it as a little flu or mere cold (“*gripezinha ou resfriadinho*”). In one instance, he noted that for him falling sick would be riskless given his “athletic past” and that he survived far worse situations such as when he had been stabbed during his electoral campaign: “*No meu caso particular, pelo meu histórico de atleta, caso fosse contaminado pelo vírus não precisaria me preocupar, nada sentiria ou seria, quando muito acometido de uma gripezinha ou resfriadinho*” (Notícia Da Manhã 2020, 2:32).<sup>7</sup>

In a more recent address to the public during the inauguration of a new section of the North-South São Simão (Goiás state – GO) to Estrela d’Oeste (São Paulo state – SP) railway track, he also praised rural workers and farmers who continued to work and who did not “remain home and cower” in face of the pandemic, hence supporting the country’s economy: “*vocês [produtores rurais] não ficar em casa, não se acovardaram e nós temos que enfrentar os nossos problemas*” (O Globo 2021).<sup>8</sup> He then continued to admonish people who have, in his logic, been cowardly about the pandemic: “*Chega de frescura e de ‘mimimi’.* *Vão ficar chorando até quando? Temos que enfrentar os problemas*” (Toeldo and Cicci 2021).<sup>9</sup> By warning “these

people" that they should stop with their "whining" and using an onomatopoeia to mirror childish moaning, he not only persevered in his infantilizing rhetoric but also clearly established a dichotomy between "us" and "them" when he asked when "their crying" would end. As he continued this speech he also asked: "*Mas onde vai parar o Brasil se nós pararmos?*" (Toledo and Cicci 2021).<sup>10</sup> This rhetorical question indicated his focus on the economy, in the hope of continuing to ground himself as a candidate of the working people and particularly of the most precarious communities or, a "father of the poor", as Vargas described himself. However, this association between family dynamics and the economy was also grounded in Kubitschek's politics and his plan for the Brazilian family unit, which focused on creating "middle-class, consumer-oriented families" (Wolfe 2010, 92).

As Wolfe noted, Kubitschek shifted the post-Vargas focus from "women as workers to women as housewives, even though the majority of Brazilian women continued to work outside the home" (2010, 93). This type of discourse was itself underpinned by a long-established mobilization of women's personhood and bodies in the development of the capitalist system. Indeed, the overall production system relies on the nuclear family to maintain current workers healthy and happy, and therefore to continue to work as well as produce new workers; roles fulfilled by the housewife and mother. Additionally, the nuclear family itself emerged "in the period of primitive accumulation also as the most important institution for the appropriation and concealment of women's labor" (Federici 2014, 97).

The very fashioning of the nuclear family, and the gender roles supposedly inherent to it, was attached to the reproductive exploitation of women's bodies in the development of the capitalist system. For this reason, any threat to the destabilization or destruction of this family unit could be seen as an attack on the core of the economic system. This thus accounts for the alignment in Bolsonaro's rhetoric between economic interests and a gendered rhetoric grounded in hegemonic masculinity – whether in his words or in the strategy to wear football jerseys when delivering official addresses to continue to frame himself as a patriarchal man of the people – and reject any identity that does not fit such heteronormativity. This was also apparent in his promotion of the military regime as we have discussed above, a point showcased by Assumpção (2020, 12) who pointed to the "abstract appeal to the masculine idealization of the military" in Bolsonaro's repertoire. Indeed, a notable element of Bolsonaro's gendered performance of self is the association between his own masculinity and his status as a former military officer, which framed military values as paragons of masculinity and conversely himself as the embodiment of these values. This is also ironic given that he was dismissed from the army after having been tried twice.

However, and in accordance with the post-structural understanding of identity highlighted above, the performing self is a process of setting boundaries, which hints at the inevitability of a converse articulation of a negative alterity that embodies the opposites of one's traits. In the corpus of performances studied for this chapter, this negative articulation of identity was clearest during a ceremony

in which Bolsonaro announced plans for the tourism industry on November 10, 2020. Using the homophobic slur of “*maricas*” (“sissies”) in combination with the Darwinist form of fatalism already discussed in the introduction, he pointed at the weakness of the country during the pandemic:

*Tem que acabar com esse negócio, pô, lamento mortos, lamento. Todos nos vamos a morrer um dia. Todo mundo vá morrer (...). Não adianta fugir disso, fugir da realidade. Tem que deixar de ser um país de maricas, pô. Olha que prato cheio para a imprensa. Prato cheio para a urubuzada que está ali atrás. Temos que enfrentar de peito aberto, lutar. Que geração é essa nossa?*

*TV Brasil Governo Agora 2021a, 3:32<sup>11</sup>*

This type of discourse is grounded in an age-old demonization of queerness, which is underpinned by the supposed death drive of which queer relations are accused as they appear, in a capitalist logic, to be socially “useless” given that they do not provide a space for reproduction (Edelman 2004). As noted by Assumpção, “being a man in Brazil means being a leader, being the ‘head of the house’, protecting and guiding the wife and the children, being strong and commanding, being free and, interestingly enough, playing football” (Assumpção 2020, 8). This played hand-in-hand with Bolsonaro’s militaristic discourse, which celebrated the:

... lure of firearms in the development of male personhood in Brazil [...]. In Morro, as in many Brazilian favelas, a large subset of male teenagers joined the drug trafficking trade. Their counterparts presented a contrasting yet related identity behavior – for example, joining the army or police force, which is only an option for a few of these young adults. For those who escaped a life of crime but were not offered a position in the army or police, working as a security guard was a third alternative to reverting back to the invisibility of the poor, to gain respect, to assume the role of protector, to have a place in a hierarchical structure.

*Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2020, 26*

Or, as Funari noted, in the context of Bolsonaro supporters, “individual gun ownership represents an opportunity to reassert patriarchal domination in a social context where constant violence generates affective insecurities” (2021, 10).

## Conclusion

Many scholars argue that populism “surges most strongly in contexts of crisis” (Roberts 1995, 113) or claim at the very least that “some degree of crisis [...] is a necessary precondition for populism” (Laclau 2005, 177). However, a characteristic of the stylistic approach to populism we used throughout this chapter is that it turns this perspective completely upside down. Instead of arguing that crises

are the root cause of populism, the second performative cluster of the populist phenomenon, performances of crisis are based on the premise that politicians use the populist style to actively perform the image of a society in crisis in order to convince their audiences that they live in a turning point of history where their vote will change politics for the better. Indeed, our approach sees "crisis as a phenomenon that can be experienced only through mediated performance, whereby a systemic failure is elevated to the level of perceived 'crisis'" (Moffitt 2016, 118). Such an ontological shift in perspective acknowledges that there is not one single universal understanding of crises that can be objectively defined, but rather a multiplicity of potential phenomena linked to their specific cultural, social, and political contexts which have to be symbolically mediated, in other words strategically framed, for them to emerge as a crisis. This definition thus emphasizes the performative dimension of the concept of crisis in the sense that the very idea of crisis comes into being through the performances of a political actor to a specific audience. That is not to say that crises have no basis whatsoever and, to develop this idea, we follow Hay's (1999) distinction between failure and crisis. In his influential work, he famously defined a systemic failure as "an accumulation or condensation of contradictions" that make a system unable to be perpetuated, "whether perceived or not", while a crisis is "a condition in which failure is identified and widely perceived, a condition in which systemic failure has become politically and ideationally mediated" (Hay 1999, 324).

As was highlighted in our discussion of collective performances of the elite and the people, Bolsonaro relied on two types of performance of crisis. The first, and the most recent, was brought to him on a silver platter with the *Operação Lava Jato* which provided the ideal context to articulate the idea that Brazil was facing a severe crisis in its political establishment and, more generally, a crisis of representation that could be solved through the leadership of less corrupt politicians as himself. The second type of crisis Bolsonaro articulated was more multifaceted and grounded in his nationalist and reactionary ideology. As hinted at by many of the quotes we highlighted, Bolsonaro framed Brazil as undergoing multiple crises that fit his nationalist agenda: a crisis of traditional and religious values, which his commitment to Christianity could tackle; a crisis of insecurity, which his tough "law and order" stance would solve; and finally a crisis of masculinity, which had led the Brazilian people to become weak and feminized. Although these performances of crises held fast for the first years of Bolsonaro's presidency, the emergence in 2020 of a much less subjective and contestable failure of the global system with the COVID-19 pandemic deeply challenged his narrative of crisis. With the COVID-19 virus being globally and unanimously recognized as a crisis, the pandemic started to dominate the political conversation, overshadowing every other crisis in the public imaginary, a fact that Bolsonaro himself lamented as he complained that "*Tudo agora é pandemia*" (TV Brasil Governo Agora 2021b, 3:31).<sup>12</sup> Showing that Bolsonar was unable to process this health crisis through the ideological lens of his "religious nationalism" (Pereira 2020, 112), we have showcased



in this chapter that Bolsonaro attempted to reframe COVID-19 as a crisis of masculinity that did not need urgent containment and medical measures but could be handled as long as Brazilians stopped being “sissies” and faced the “virus like a man”. Through this strategic performative move, and despite every form of scientific evidence going against him, Bolsonaro hence attempted to reassert the control of the situation as well as the validity of his reactionary narrative in the face of a crisis that he was ideologically ill-equipped to handle.

Although our chapter does not hope to tackle the extremely wide political and ethical ramifications of Bolsonaro’s treatment of the pandemic, we wished to highlight how a critical and performative approach to populism could partly account for what would otherwise be understood as a nonsensical reaction to denial. More than this, through an engagement with some of the deeper idiosyncrasies of Brazilian politics and culture, what our chapter highlights is the heavily contingent nature of populism as a chameleonic style that not only gets adapted to the ideological agenda of a politician but also resonates with a specific political context.

## Notes

- 1 “It is a reality; the virus is here. We need to face it, but face it like a man, dammit. Not like a kid. We need to face the virus. Like a reality. That is life. We will all die one day”.
- 2 “Brazil does not tolerate you anymore. Get out”.
- 3 The concept of incorporating other cultures while developing a new identity was expressed in Brazilian modernism through the concept of cannibalism, formalized in the *Manifesto Antropófago* (Cannibal Manifesto) written by the poet Oswald de Andrade.
- 4 Among these, we can consider: (1) An official announcement broadcast on television on 24/03/20 (Bolsonaro 2020b); (2) The aforementioned speech on the street was on 30/03/2020 (BBC News Brasil 2020); (3) The speech occurred during a ceremony to announce plans for the tourism industry on 10/11/2020; (4) The speech for the inauguration of the North-South railway on 04/03/202 (TV Brasil Governo Agora 2021a).
- 5 “Whoever does not accept my flags: family, God, Brazil, guns, freedom of expression, free market ... whoever does not accept this is in the wrong government”.
- 6 Beyond the literal meaning of “flags”, *bandeiras* also has nationalist undertones, implicitly referencing the *bandeirantes* (flag carriers), explorers, and later slavers from the early modern history of Brazil who were considered heroes in traditional Brazilian historiography but whose violent practices have been challenged in more critical accounts of the country. The *bandeiras* (often political flags) can also connote main goals, causes or worldviews supported by political parties.
- 7 “In my particular case, given my past as an athlete, should I be infected by the virus, there would be no need to worry, I would feel nothing, and it would be nothing, just like when you have a little flu or a mere cold”.
- 8 “You [farmers/agricultural producers] have not stayed at home, you did not behave in a cowardly fashion, and we have to face our problems”.
- 9 “Enough whining and ‘mimimi’ (complaining). Until when are they going to keep crying? We have to face our problems”.
- 10 “But, where will Brazil end up if we stop now?”

11

This needs to stop. I feel sorry for the dead, I do. But we'll all die one day. Everyone will die. (...) There is no point running away from it, running away from reality. [Brazil] must stop being a country of sissies. [...] We need to face it open-hearted, to fight. What kind of generations is ours?

12 "Now everything's about this pandemic".

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