

# The square against the ballot box: Bolsonaro supporters' challenge to the Presidential Election in Rio de Janeiro<sup>1</sup>

A praça contra as urnas: o protesto bolsonarista contra a eleição presidencial de 2022 no Rio de Janeiro

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## ABSTRACT

This article looks at the occupation of the square next to the army headquarters in Rio de Janeiro the day after the second round of Brazil's 2022 presidential election. This mobilization brought together radical Bolsonaro voters and activists calling on the army to undo the election result to restore the defeated President, Jair Bolsonaro. This study provides insights into the dynamics of collective action in the radical fringes of Bolsonaroism. While resorting to a non-violent repertoire of action, namely the occupation of a square, the participants borrowed from the conceptions and logics of action of military circles. The duality of this mobilization provides insight more generally into a central dimension of Bolsonaroism, namely the mobilization of the rules of democracy and the rule of law to disqualify their foundations and procedures.

**Keywords:** Brazil, Occupation protest, Far right, Election, The military.

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## RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a ocupação da praça Duque de Caxias no Rio de Janeiro depois da segunda volta das eleições presidenciais brasileiras de 2022. Esta mobilização reuniu eleitores radicais bolsonaristas e activistas que apelavam ao exército para desfazer o resultado das eleições e restaurar o Presidente derrotado, Jair Bolsonaro. O estudo dessa ocupação permite compreender a dinâmica da ação colectiva nas franjas radicais do Bolsonarismo. Ao mesmo tempo que recorrem a um repertório de ação não violento, nomeadamente a ocupação de uma praça, os participantes importam as concepções e lógicas de ação dos círculos militares. A dualidade desta mobilização permite compreender de forma mais geral uma dimensão central do bolsonarismo, a mobilização das regras da democracia e do Estado de direito para desqualificar os seus fundamentos e procedimentos.

**Palavras-chave:** Brasil, Ocupação, Extrema direita, Eleição, Militares.

## INTRODUCTION

Almost two years to the day after the storming of the Capitol, Brazil's federal institutions were invaded and ransacked on January 8, 2023, by Bolsonaro supporters and activists who filmed themselves and later posted their videos on social media networks. Such onslaught followed nearly seventy days of occupied squares near army headquarters where these supporters called upon the military to undo the 2022 presidential election, alleging electoral fraud. Taking place in the state capitals of Brazil, these occupation protest began the day after Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva won the runoff with 50.9% of the votes, a narrow lead over his rival Jair Bolsonaro (49.1%). Immediately disputed, the election had however been questioned for over a year by Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters.

Analyzing the occupation protest in Rio de Janeiro informs us about the collective action methods employed by the radical fringes of what is commonly called Bolsonarism<sup>2</sup>. This branch, described as "conservative" by its members, brings together a set of organizations from the liberal

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<sup>2</sup> Solano E., "La politique et la morale selon l'extrême droite brésilienne", *Alternatives Sud*, n°27, 2020, p. 59-75.

and conservative right<sup>3</sup> to neo-integralism, a neo-fascist inspired movement<sup>4</sup>. Bolsonarism took shape after the 2018 election, but was not unified in a political party. Rather, it is disseminated among a series of activist, religious, and professional organizations not necessarily related to each other. Indeed, if Jair Bolsonaro was vested, a few months prior the 2018 presidential election, by the Social Liberal Party (PSL) and then in 2022 by the Liberal Party (PL), these organizations gather the candidates and elected officials supporting the deposed President but lack militant bases.

Rio de Janeiro's case allows us to analyze the articulation operated by the radical fringes of Bolsonarism between two distinct logics: the use of non-violent methods and the call for the use of military force. Occupations constitute a set of actions<sup>5</sup> employed by various actors to challenge authoritarian regimes, as illustrated by the Arab revolutions, or private actors whose political influence is deemed contrary to democracy, such as Occupy Wall Street<sup>6</sup>. In Latin America, square occupations has been particularly mobilized by social movements against electoral fraud<sup>7</sup>. In the case of Plaza del Zócalo, Mexico, studied by Hélène Combes, occupations were a method to avoid violent escalation, i.e., the resolution of electoral disagreements by military force<sup>8</sup>. In our case study, however, the post-election occupation seeks to justify and support a violent outcome: it is backed by a call for military intervention and therefore by the forcible ousting of President Lula, re-elected for a third term.

The duality of the Brazilian post-election occupations must be related to the admission, amidst it, of practices and concepts specific to military circles, an important constitutive component of Bolsonarism. While the autonomy of what is oftentimes called the “military society” is subjected to debate<sup>9</sup>, in Brazil as elsewhere, some authors nevertheless emphasize

3 Rocha C., Solano E., Medeiros J., *The Bolsonaro Paradox. The Public Sphere and Right-Wing Counterpublicity in Contemporary Brazil*, Cham, Springer, 2021.

4 Pereira Gonçalves L., Carneiro O., *O fascismo em camisas verdes: do integralismo ao neointegralismo*, Rio de Janeiro, FGV Editora, 2020.

5 Charles Tilly defines repertoire of action as “established means that certain groups employ to push forward or defend their interests”. Tilly C., “Les origines du répertoire d'action collective contemporaine en France et en Grande-Bretagne”, *Vingtième Siècle*, n°4, 1984, pp. 94.

6 Nez H., “Occupation de places”», in Fillieule O. (dir.), *Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2020, pp. 424-428.

7 Combes H., “Les mobilisations contre les fraudes électorales au Mexique”, in Dehouve D., Bey M., *Regards sur la transition démocratique au Mexique*, Paris, L'Harmattan-Maison de l'archéologie et de l'ethnologie, 2006, pp. 57-86.

8 Combes H., “Camper au cœur du pouvoir. Le plâton post-électoral de 2006 à Mexico”, *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, vol. 17, n°2, 2010, pp. 53-70.

9 Gresle F., “La “société militaire”. Son devenir à la lumière de la professionnalisation”, *Revue française de*

the existence of values and practices specific to members of the Brazilian armed forces<sup>10</sup>. Beyond elements common to other armies—conservatism, willingness to take up arms and non-identification with civilians<sup>11</sup>—, the Brazilian military environment is characterized by a significant political commitment despite its professionalization<sup>12</sup>. This commitment resulted in frequent interventions into political life during the 20th century, particularly as coups or attempts to overthrow power<sup>13</sup>. Several regime changes resulted from armed forces mobilization: the proclamation of the Republic in 1889, Gétulio Vargas' authoritarian government (1930-1945) preceded and supported by the tenentist movement (*tenentismo*) and the military dictatorship established after the 1964 coup. From the 1980s onwards, the transition to democracy and the adoption of a new constitution in 1988 seemed to have led to a political disengagement by the military. However, Bolsonarism emerged from the militarization of the political game, to which we will return later, which permeated the course of the occupations organized by Bolsonaro supporters in the aftermath of the 2022 presidential election.

In this perspective, the demonstration under analysis is thus situated at the intersection of what Julie le Mazier and Guillaume Gourgues describe as “conservative participation,” i.e., collective actions aimed at reproducing the social and political order, and “participation in law and order,” which refers to engagement in missions for maintaining public order, security, or defense<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, the occupation in Rio borrows from an ideal of direct democracy, however less focused on decision-making than on expressing support for one or more representatives, similarly to conservative demonstrations conducted before and after the 1964 coup<sup>15</sup> or by the Gaullist right in France<sup>16</sup>. But it also consists of a call for overthrowing an elected official by

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*sociologie*, vol. 44, n 4, 2003, pp. 777-798 ; Joana J., “Chapitre 2 / L’activité militaire”, in Joana J., *Les armées contemporaines*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2012, pp. 71-132.

10 Castro C., “Em campo com os militares”, in Castro C., Leirner P., (dir.), *Antropologia dos militares : reflexões sobre a pesquisa de campo*, Rio de Janeiro, FGV Editora, 2010, pp. 13-30.

11 Gresle F., “La “société militaire”. Son devenir à la lumière de la professionnalisation”, *op. cit.*

12 Carvalho J. M. de, *Forças armadas e política no Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, Jorge Zahar ed, 2005.

13 Stepan A., *The military in Politics. Changing paterns no Brazil*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971; Carvalho J. M. de, *Forças armadas e política no Brasil*, *op.cit.*

14 Gourgues G., Le Mazier J., “ Participations à l’ordre et participations conservatrices”, *Participations*, vol. 29, n°1, 2021, pp. 7-40.

15 Martins J., “A marcha da Família com Deus pela Liberdade em São Paulo: direitas, participação política e golpe no Brasil, 1964”, *Revista de História*, n°180, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2316-9141.rh.2021.167214>. Consulté le 30 janvier 2023.

16 Tartakowski D., *Le pouvoir est dans la rue. Crises politiques et manifestations en France*, Paris, Aubier, coll. « Historique », 1998, pp. 191-202.

force to curb what is seen by Bolsonaro voters as a “threat” to Brazil: the return of Lula and the left to power.

More generally, the duality of this post-electoral occupation reveals a core dimension of Bolsonarism, namely the mobilization of the rules of the democratic game and the rule of law to disqualify its foundations and procedures. Like other conservative movements, Bolsonaro voters use the framing of their opponents to subvert their content <sup>17</sup>.

This paper focuses on Rio de Janeiro. While the demonstration reached all Brazilian capitals, its dynamics differed according to the local contexts <sup>18</sup>. Firstly, Rio de Janeiro state is a privileged anchoring place for Bolsonarism since the Bolsonaro family resides in the city. Indeed, part of the family’s political career took place at the state level. Jair Bolsonaro was first elected as a Rio city councilor (1989-1991) and then as a federal deputy for the state (1991-2018). His eldest son, Flávio, one of his main right-hand men, also served as a deputy for the state from 2003 to 2018 and has just been elected senator in the same constituency. A second son, Carlos, has been a Rio city councilor since 2001. The family has therefore a significant presence in the local political arena and is tied to a wide range of actors and organizations. In 2022, Jair Bolsonaro won 56.53% of the votes in Rio at the runoff, 7.4 points more than the national average compared to 43.47% for Lula in the same state. Rio is also home to a substantial military electorate due to the neighborhood concentrating the largest garrison in Latin America, the Vila Militar, and the increasing militarization of urban security, exemplified by the 2018 Olympic Games <sup>19</sup>. Finally, this state is characterized by congregating a series of armed groups—militias, traffickers and paramilitaries—that blur the boundaries between violence perpetrated by state agents and violence perpetrated by non-state actors. Accusations of intermingling between certain political parties and militias are regularly voiced in the political arena. Some are well documented, especially those concerning the Bolsonaro family’s

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17 Della Sudda M., “Participation conservatrice”, in Petit G., Blondiaux L., Casillo I., Fourniau J.-M., Gourgues G., Hayat S., Lefebvre R., Rui S., Wojcik S., Zetlaoui-Léger J. (dir.), *Dictionnaire critique et interdisciplinaire de la Participation, DicoPart (2ème édition, en ligne)*, GIS Démocratie et Participation, <https://www.dicopart.fr/participation-conservatrice-2022>. Accessed May 1, 2023.

18 For the cases of São Paulo and Brasília, cf. Machuca M., “Occuper, bloquer et envahir: la trajectoire des mouvements de contestation post-électorales de 2022 au Brésil”, in Mariana Falcão Chaise (org.), *L’élection présidentielle brésilienne de 2022 : le présent et l’avenir d’une démocratie*, Paris, Observations des élections brésiliennes (OEB) et Observatoire politique de l’Amérique Latine (OPALC), 2023.

19 Chirio M., “Le rôle des militaires dans la déstabilisation de la démocratie brésilienne (2015-2018)”, *Brésil(s)*, vol.1, 2018, <http://journals.openedition.org/bresils/3029>. Accessed April 29, 2023. I thank Maud Chirio for bringing this to my attention.

relationship with local militias <sup>20</sup>.

This article presents the initial results of an eight-month survey on the structuring of Bolsonaroism in Rio de Janeiro, conducted between 2019 and 2022. It includes an ethnographic follow-up of the demonstration during its two-month existence. Besides the thirty or so interviews conducted for my research, which mainly focuses on Bolsonaro-aligned candidates in the Rio state elections, I visited the Duque de Caxias square every two days after the runoff. Given the occupation's dynamics, described above, I chose to converse at length with the participants by guiding the discussion on themes that I would have explored in a more formalized interview. But I decided not to ask to record the conversations, so as not to be perceived as an "infiltrator." Despite this informality, I have always stated my status as a political science researcher. Such method allowed me to follow the demonstration for two months and to engage in long discussion with thirteen respondents, for two to four hours depending on the case, in addition to shorter exchanges with other participants during each of my visits. Of the thirteen interviewees, five were reservists (men only), three retirees (women only), two small business owners, a saleswoman, a sales representative and a computer engineer. All respondents are over 45 years old. Further, several of them have added me to their WhatsApp contacts and have regularly sent me collective messages, some excerpts of which I reproduce for the purposes of this article. Finally, this paper remains deliberately vague as to identifying the occupation organizers due to prosecutions initiated as part of the "Crimes against the State" operation, deployed in several states including Rio, targeting people who "participated, financed, acted by omission or fomented" the attack of January 8, 2023 <sup>21</sup>.

From discussing the singularity of the post-election occupation within the history of Brazilian conservative collective action, the article then focuses on the categories adopted by Bolsonaro voters to describe their action and justify a military intervention, before evoking the implementation of military practices and concepts in the course of the occupation.

The day after the runoff, protests against the election led to a demonstration in the Duque de Caxias square, opposite the army headquarters for the eastern region. This square symbolizes the Bolsonaroist's request for intervention from the military institution. It also enabled participants to benefit from the protection of the army and not to be dislodged for two months, despite having their objective quickly labeled as a "putsch" in the media and the political arena.

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20 Paes Manso B., *A república das milícias: dos esquadrões da morte a era Bolsonaro*, São Paulo, Todavia, 2019.

21 Peduzzi P., "PF cumpre 38 mandados em 8 estados, em operação sobre atos golpistas", *Agência Brasil*, 18 avril 2023, <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/justica/noticia/2023-04/pf-cumpre-38-mandados-em-8-estados-em-operacao-sobre-atos-golpistas>. Accessed May 12, 2023.

Bolsonaro voters mobilized from October 31, 2022, to January 9, 2023. Located at the exit of the “Central” train station, an important transit point for the lower-middle and working classes residing in northern Rio (Baixada Fluminense), the square is surrounded by a large four-lane avenue and public buildings. At its center we see a statue of Duque de Caxias, patron of the army.

This square was transformed into an encampment that took the form of a real temporary city. Quickly secured by barriers, access to the tents was subject to a check of people’s identity and intentions. Around the camp, there were dry toilets and a stand, where coffee and bottles of water were offered free of charge to the demonstrators. Before the tents, campers and day participants gathered on a forecourt, itself protected by barriers decorated with banners in Brazilian Portuguese and English, which read “Federal Intervention Now,” “We Want Article 142,” “Criminalize Communism” or “Brazil has been stolen.” For the first three weeks, the square hosted massive protests, especially on weekends, with activists dressed in yellow and green or wrapped in the Brazilian flag. By the end of November, the number of participants declined, from several hundred to a few thousand people, depending on the day and the weather. On weekdays, the square was mainly attended by retirees and military reservists. Over the weekend, the demonstration gained momentum and the Bolsonarists were joined by family, friends and activists in the square, all dressed in green and yellow.

It is difficult to give precise figures on the number of participants. According to a census by the Rio City Council, the camp had sixty tents, although it is unknown whether they housed one or more people. But this figure disregards the number of people mobilized on the square or around it on a daily, weekly or more episodic basis. The press mentions “thousands of people” during the most mobilizing weekends, while remaining most often evasive about the number of participants. From the outset, the most well-known media outlets opposed the occupation and have therefore rarely mentioned precise figures. The occupation’s organizers announced unverifiable estimates, namely “one million Brazilians” during high-attendance days, such as November 15, 2022, when the demonstration spilled over the square for dozen meters. To me, the former seem to largely underestimate the scale of the demonstrations during the weekends in November, whereas the latter greatly overestimate it. However, we can make a more precise estimate in the absence of published data. Its participants are characterized by their heterogeneity since we meet, on the square, reservists, activists of liberal and conservative organizations, religious people, candidates in the 2022 election and isolated voters.

## OCCUPYING THE PUBLIC SPACE TO DEMONSTRATE STRENGTH

The demonstration organized before the army headquarters integrates the continuum set of actions employed by the new right born in the 2000s, based on taking over the streets and using digital technologies. But it is singled out for its use of a repertoire of action unprecedented in the history of the Brazilian right, namely the long-term occupation of a square to show the support enjoyed by the defeated President. Looking back at the history of conservative demonstrations allows us to grasp the specificity of the collective action organized in 2022.

### Political Crisis and the Revival of Conservative Collective Action

In Brazil, takeover of the streets by the conservative right is nothing new. On the eve of the 1964 coup, large-scale demonstrations known as “March of the Family with God for Liberty” were held in major cities across the country. Calling for an intervention by the armed forces to fight against the communist threat, these demonstrations also focused on defending the family and denouncing the corruption of elected officials. They consisted of marches with collective prayers in the public space<sup>22</sup>. After the military power takeover, they turned into demonstrations to celebrate the country’s “salvation.” In the 1960s, however, these street demonstrations remained punctual and after the coup, they were mainly organized at the initiative of military leaders<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, while the conservative and liberal right-wing parties joined forces to support the military break, this alliance remained cyclical and mainly motivated by rejection of the “communist peril.” Adherence of right-wing organizations to the dictatorship has thus been discreet outside of official celebrations<sup>24</sup>.

Democratization, initiated in the 1980s and embodied in the 1988 Constitution, was accompanied by an evolution in right-wing collective action. Until the late 1990s, the conservative parties had a number of elected representatives, but were not regularly active outside election periods. Liberals, for their part, have invested in internationalized arenas to disseminate expert knowledge built within think tanks. It was only in the 2000s that new liberal and conservative

22 Martins J., “A marcha da Família com Deus pela Liberdade em São Paulo: direitas, participação política e golpe no Brasil, 1964”, *op. cit.*

23 Patto Sá Motta R., *Passados presentes. O golpe de 1964 e a ditadura militar*, *op. cit.*

24 *Ibid*, chapitre 6.



organizations emerged and took to the streets. Camila Rocha, Jonas Medeiro and Ester Solano evoke the birth of a “new” right, the result of an evolution in sociability based on technological innovation given the early appropriation of social networks in Brazil <sup>25</sup>. As early as 2006 and the monthly payments affair (*mensalão*)<sup>26</sup>, digital communities of ultraliberals and conservatives emerged, developing a specific rhetoric based on aggression and caustic criticism. This rhetoric was then described as a fitting response to the immorality of opponents by the intellectual and astrologer, Olavo De Carvalho, whose influence on the Bolsonaro family is well known <sup>27</sup>.

The economic crisis of the 2010s led to the acceleration of a cycle of protests, initially dominated by progressive groups contesting the increase in public transport fees in several major cities in 2013. But as the *Lava Jato* scandal erupted in 2014, leading to the indictment for corruption of several elected officials, a right-wing counter-public gradually emerged. Heterogeneous actors have come together to denounce corruption, using digital tools to coordinate collective action <sup>28</sup>. Starting in 2014, these counter-public organizations coordinated rallies in the avenues of the state capital’s affluent neighborhoods (Copacabana Avenue in Rio and Paulista Avenue in São Paulo), where participants came with their families, dressed in yellow and green, carrying banners against the Workers’ Party (PT) and corruption, and even calling upon the army to intervene <sup>29</sup>.

This cycle of protests emerged at a time when the *Lava Jato* scandal was otherwise the subject of continuous media coverage, on television, in newspapers and in magazines such as *Veja* and *Istoé*, which devoted almost 40% of their content to this affair alone between 2014 and 2018 <sup>30</sup>. Against this backdrop, a number of actors gained new notoriety and were even seen as “God’s messengers” by some conservative activists <sup>31</sup>. Such is the case of Judge Sergio Moro, who became a symbol of the fight against impunity for elected officials, and Prosecutor Deltan

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25 Rocha C., Solano E., Medeiros J., *The Bolsonaro Paradox...*, *op. cit*

26 The monthly payments scandal refers to a system whereby the Executive branch, represented by Lula, was suspected of buying the votes of opposition federal deputies by paying monthly salaries.

27 Rocha C., Solano E., Medeiros J., *The Bolsonaro Paradox...*, *op. cit*

28 Kunrath Silva M., “A apropriação conservadora do ciclo de protestos de 2013: rumo aos protestos anti-Dilma?”, *Lusotopie*, vol. XVII, n°1, 2018, pp. 88-111.

29 Rocha C., Solano E., Medeiros J., *The Bolsonaro Paradox...*, *op. cit*

30 Baptista E. A., Souza Telles H., “Lava Jato: escândalo político e opinião pública”, in Kerche F., Feres Jr J. (eds.), *Operação Lava Jato e a democracia brasileira*, São Paulo, Contracorrente, 2018, pp. 229-255.

31 Sá and Silva F., “Relational Legal Consciousness and Anticorruption: Lava Jato, Social Media Interactions, and the Co-Production of Law’s Detraction in Brazil (2017–2019)”, *Law & Society Review*, vol. 56, n°3, 2022, pp. 344-368.

Dallagnol. These legal professionals contributed to disseminating a framing of the *Lava Jato* affair, associating PT with a “gang” or criminal organization, based on legal interpretations that are today open to question.<sup>32</sup> They have also relied on social networks to reinforce their action, calling on their followers to take collective action against elected officials suspected of corruption<sup>33</sup>.

Amidst this rebirth of conservative collective action, President Dilma Rousseff lost her majority in Congress and was the target of impeachment proceedings in 2016 due to her government’s “fiscal pedaling”<sup>34</sup>. As for Lula, he was jailed for corruption in 2018 and excluded from the electoral run<sup>35</sup>. Hence, when former army captain and federal deputy Jair Bolsonaro presented his candidacy in 2018, electing the fight against corruption and the defense of traditional values as his core program, he won the support of some of the liberals and conservatives who had been mobilized for several years.

Jair Bolsonaro’s victory in 2018 did not result in abandoning the streets, but rather in a reframing to this means of action. Demonstrations then took the form of support mobilizations. Throughout his term, Bolsonaro voters and activists gathered in the avenues of capital cities to support President Bolsonaro’s action against “a system” that would persecute him, and in so doing, strengthen the executive’s capacity to act against other powers. During some of these support demonstrations, Bolsonarists called on the army to intervene against the judiciary and/or to curb the “communist threat” represented by PT.

Occupying the Duque de Caxias square is thus in line with the support demonstrations that have marked Jair Bolsonaro’s term. But the encampment marks an evolution in the modes of collective action favored to demonstrate the social roots of Bolsonarism.

### **The street as an electoral barometer**

“Supreme is the people,” read the banners surrounding the occupation encampment in

32 Kerche F. Marona M., *A política no banco dos réus. A operação Lava Jato e a erosão da democracia no Brasil*, São Paulo, Editora Autênciã, 2022, pp. 95-131.

33 Sá and Silva F., “Relational Legal Consciousness and Anticorruption: Lava Jato”, *op. cit.*

34 “Fiscal pedaling” refers to an accounting strategy aimed at artificially creating a balanced budget by delaying certain transfers of public resources. On the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, see Goirand C., Sa Vilas Boas M. H., “Rendre compte de la destitution de Dilma Rousseff: propositions pour un agenda scientifique”, *Lusotopie*, vol. XVII, n°1, 2018, pp. 11-39.

35 Lula was released in November 2019 after the impartiality of Judge Moro and Prosecutor Dallagnol was called into question, following publication of their digital exchanges by the investigative newspaper *Intercept*. The Supreme Court overturned the sentences against Lula in 2021. Following this annulment, the case was transferred to the judicial section of the Federal District, which will oversee the ruling in the years to come.

Rio. This play on words, addressed to the Supreme Court, illustrates the image intended for dissemination by the mobilized actors in Brazil and abroad: that of citizens engaged in an exercise of direct democracy. Systematically described as “spontaneous,” “leaderless” and “not funded <sup>36</sup>” by any specific organization, this collective action was presented to observers as a democratic upsurge by Brazilians concerned about the future of their homeland. But beyond this discourse, mainly addressed to the international community <sup>37</sup>, the occupation aims to move the political confrontation to the streets. It intended to demonstrate the popular support enjoyed by Jair Bolsonaro and to support the thesis that Lula’s victory was impossible. At the Duque de Caxias square, those mobilized regularly repeat that Lula’s electorate is extremely small. This view did not emerge from the occupation, but was already at the heart of the 2022 election campaign. For example, Bolsonaroist rallies and campaign meetings regularly featured “there is no opposition”; unidentifiable videos circulated of campaign staff “bought” by PT to create the illusion of large-scale rallies; and Lula’s voters were reduced to drug dealers and delinquents... all elements that were later reproduced during the post-election occupation in Rio. In fact, the evidence of the Brazilian population’s full support for Jair Bolsonaro is constantly evoked at the Duque de Caxias square. In December, as mobilization began to wane during the week, a reservist around fifty years of age stated as an aside, in a tone of certainty, that “the president is so loved by Brazilians that he will have population support [if the armed forces intervened],” eliciting widespread approval from the dozen or so people listening <sup>38</sup>.

The imaginary of a Brazil united behind Bolsonaro must be related to how radical Bolsonaro voters assess electoral power relations. Rejecting “misleading” polls and the “stolen” ballot results, they measure the support for Jair Bolsonaro by the demonstrations in which they participate and the behavior of their social circles. In this perspective, the demonstration in the Duque de Caxias square proves the invalidity of the election. On a busy Sunday, an activist from a traditionalist Catholic organization in his sixties scans the square and adds: “Look, with the number of people here, how could he (Lula) get 51%?” <sup>39</sup> The day after Lula took office, Maria, a retired resident of an affluent Niterói district, laughed: “Pff, how can anyone believe

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36 Judicial investigation following the ransacking of the institutions in Brasília has, of course, made it possible to identify the financiers of this collective action. For the reasons given in the methodology section, we do not name them in this article.

37 Some activists, for example, have asked me to contact French journalists to spread their “version” of the demonstration.

38 Field Notes, December 11, 2022.

39 Field Notes, November 13, 2022.

that Lula won, there is nobody on the streets, on the other side.” When I questioned her why PT voters would mobilize the day after Lula took office, she replied in a matter-of-fact tone, “to support him <sup>40</sup>!”

The occupation participants also continually exchange videos of demonstrations organized in other Brazilian cities, as well as in other countries (USA, Portugal in particular). Some of their videos, however, are based on inconsistencies and are clearly fabricated, such as a video of a Brazilian on a bus, who claims to be joining demonstrators “in front of the UN in Brussels.” These same participants may also admit to exaggerating the information they publish on social media. On a rainy day in early January 2023, with around a hundred people in the square, one man commented: “I always tell my friends there are 10,000 of us. I always give the figure of 10,000, whatever the situation. To encourage them <sup>41</sup>.” As a result, these participants, as well as the unidentified information they received, helped to build the idea of a nationwide and international mobilization on an unprecedented scale against a fraud known to all but suppressed by media and judicial censorship in Brazil.

Radical Bolsonaro voters have therefore turned mobilization into an electoral barometer. Street demonstrations would be a litmus test to demonstrate the shortcomings of the ballot box. Lula’s election became increasingly unthinkable as they occupied the Duque de Caxias square. Daily or weekly meetings with other activists or sympathizers, as well as the constant exchange of digital content, have strengthened their conviction that they were mobilizing for a proven and just cause, driven by “respectable citizens.”

## “RESPECTABLE CITIZENS” VS. “CROOKS”

The occupation participants in the Duque de Caxias square justified their demonstration by relying on a security framing that portrayed their opponents as delinquents or criminals. They present themselves as “respectable citizens” (*cidadãos de bem*) who intend to oppose the “crooks” plundering the national wealth and leading to the country’s decay. This dichotomy, already at the heart of Bolsonarism, was exacerbated in the Duque de Caxias Square. For two months, those mobilized strove to demonstrate their virtue and, conversely, to denounce the

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40 Field Notes, January 3, 2023.

41 Field Notes, January 5, 2023.

supposed failings of their opponents, which would justify the use of extraordinary means of punishment and political conflict resolution.

### Civilized Citizens

If by occupying the Duque de Caxias square participants intended to demonstrate the strength of Bolsonarism, it should also enable voters and activists to embody, in the public arena, the values that this political branch intends to promote. These are of three types: civility, legality, and Christianity.

Firstly, to mark what would constitute the singularity of Bolsonarists in relation to their left-wing opponents, the occupation participants define themselves as “respectable citizens” who do not create “problems” (*confusão*) and work to respect the legal and moral rules of collective life. In contrast, opponents are described as “crooks” responsible for a series of ills such as urban violence, public service failures and Brazil’s political, economic, and moral bankruptcy. For some authors, this opposition game—historically, mobilized by conservatives in Brazil—reflects a rejection of the universalization of political and social rights, which should be reserved only for individuals who have proven their morality<sup>42</sup>.

As a mark of their respect for the rules of collective life, the occupation participants constantly display their civility. According to Carole Gayet, the notion of civility can refer to three distinct aspects, to which Bolsonarists refer in their discourse and in their displayed behavior: a quality of conduct, a virtue of people and a relational regime<sup>43</sup>.

First and foremost, Bolsonarists show their respect for public space. Every hour, a man in an apron cleans the square, using a broom and shovel to pick up the scattered trash (paper, cigarette butts, bottles). The square thus stands out from its immediate surroundings, where garbage litters the ground. Mobilization must not hinder social and economic activities by blocking traffic, so that outside busy weekends, demonstrators take up little of the traffic lanes, or are brought back to the square center by other participants when a car is slowed down by the crowd. Secondly, Bolsonarists regularly emphasize their individual virtue. The occupation participants are described as “upright,” which is illustrated by a series of examples: a wallet containing money and papers is found and returned intact to its owner<sup>44</sup>; a man gives five reais to his neighbors to buy a bottle of water at the other end of the square, and the bottle is given to him

42 Costa J. F. A., “Quem é o “cidadão de bem”?”, *Psicologia*, vol. 32, e190106, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1590/0103-6564e190106>. Accessed April 29, 2023.

43 Gayet-Viaud C., “La civilité est-elle réac?”, *Politix*, vol. 125, n°1, 2019, pp. 31-58.

44 Field Notes, December 11, 2022.

<sup>45</sup>, and so on. The occupation participants and organizers regularly repeat that this “democratic” movement brings together “families,” a term charged with a positive connotation, since it refers to a life in line with conservative values. Finally, those mobilized propose a particular relational regime in which social relations are marked by politeness and avoiding confrontation. The movement is described as a space for inter-class encounters, where one discovers “wonderful,” because “well-mannered,” people <sup>46</sup>. Civility is also at work in their relations with passers-by. Participants try to avoid any altercation, especially when challenged by opponents urging them to recognize the election result. If these situations quickly give rise to mutual quarreling, some repeating “Lula, thief” and others “fascists, corrupt,” these exchanges are stopped by one or more participants who interpose themselves by repeating “let it go,” “don’t play their game” <sup>47</sup>. Behind their constant display of moderation, the occupation participants strive to prove that they do not represent a radical movement; rather, they aspire only to build a better Brazil, without violence, centered on respect for the law and marked by democratic civility <sup>48</sup>.

But this claimed civility goes hand in hand with a clear separation between the occupation participants and passers-by, symbolized by the barriers surrounding the square, and the regular expression of contempt for outsiders, particularly the most destitute. Begging, a frequent sight in that part of the city, led to a series of remarks about the “laziness” of beggars and the harmful effects of the “welfare” policies created by PT, reflecting the intersection between conservatism and an “ultraliberal <sup>49</sup>” view of economic life among many activists. Additionally, people perceived as “infiltrators” are asked not to mingle with the participants, sometimes in a threatening manner, such as a woman carrying a professional camera who was quickly surrounded and escorted a few streets away by police officers <sup>50</sup>.

The occupation participants also claim their strict respect for law and order, referring to the Constitution to justify their call for a military break. In particular, they invoke Article 142, which confers on the armed forces a role “intended for the defense of the Country, for the guarantee of the constitutional powers, and, on the initiative of any of these, of law and order.”

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45 Field Notes, January 3, 2023.

46 Field Notes, November 2, 2023.

47 Field notes, December 10, 2022, and January 9, 2023.

48 Gayet-Viaud C., *La civilité urbaine. Les formes élémentaires de la coexistence démocratique*, Paris, Economica, 2022.

49 Rocha C., “Imposto é Roubo! A formação de um contrapúblico ultraliberal e os protestos pró-impeachment de Dilma Rousseff”, *Dados*, vol. 3, n°62, 2019, pp. 1-42.

50 Field Notes, November 6, 2022.

By calling for respect for the law against alleged fraud, the participants mobilize the former to justify a coup. Such an argument is not new: it was by relying on the legal framework, which they gradually redefined, that the military established an authoritarian regime in 1964<sup>51</sup>. This interpretation of the constitutional text is backed by a constant denunciation of a supposed “censorship” instituted by the Supreme Court, the media and the left. Any hindrance to their expression is interpreted as proof of the regime’s authoritarian nature, as exemplified by this occasional 34-year-old participant who wished to send a WhatsApp message on a day of heavy demonstration when the digital media were undoubtedly saturated, and who exclaimed “what a bunch of cowards!” as he showed me his phone and the lack of internet connection<sup>52</sup>. Bolsonaro voters claim they are mobilizing to ensure “freedom of speech,” which would otherwise be infringed.

Finally, the square is a place of prayer and affirmation of Christian domination in Brazil, particularly against other religions, especially Afro-descendants. At regular times, an “Our Father” is recited by those present. At 7 p.m., a group of traditionalist Catholics organized a kneeling rosary, reproducing the collective action that was particularly popular on the eve of the 1964 coup<sup>53</sup>. Importantly, the ritualized prayers repeated every day at 3pm and 7pm belong to the Catholic faith. Evangelical preaching also took place, but not regularly. While several surveys show that evangelicals account for a significant share of Bolsonaro’s electorate, the occupation organizers were first and foremost enshrining Catholic practices. This invites greater attention to be paid to Catholics, particularly traditionalists, in the mobilization and structuring of radical Bolsonarism.

All these behaviors should therefore symbolize the values that radical Bolsonarists intend to represent. As a corollary to this first point, participants engage in an ongoing activity of denouncing the actions and behavior of elected officials and, more generally, of left-leaning actors.

### **Denouncing opponents**

Claims of civility, legal order and Christianity goes hand in hand with an ongoing denunciation of opponents based on a security framing. In his study of rumors, Philippe Aldrin

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51 Pereira A., *Ditadura e repressão. O Autoritarismo e o estado de direito no Brasil, no Chile e na Argentina*, Paz e Terra, São Paulo, 2010.

52 Field Notes November 2, 2022.

53 Martins J., “A marcha da Família com Deus pela Liberdade em São Paulo: direitas, participação política e golpe no Brasil, 1964”, *op. cit.*

shows that shared accusation enhances the circle of belonging, creates a relational climate of confidentiality and welds the community together<sup>54</sup>. Similarly, ongoing denunciation is a key element in the Rio demonstration for coordinating heterogeneous actors and groups around the same interpretation of the election, and in the union around Jair Bolsonaro.

In the square, a series of individuals and groups are referred to as “crooks,” to be removed from power or punished by means other than the usual procedures, or even executed. These “crooks” refer first and foremost to Lula. His imprisonment would attest to his lack of probity, irrespective of the overturned verdict by a supposed biased Supreme Court. Secondly, they refer to all political players who do not rally behind Jair Bolsonaro. Their opposition to the ousted President is explained by their participation in an informal network of actors drawing on public resources for personal enrichment. This network includes Supreme Court members, particularly Alexandre de Moraes, one of its most active ministers, who is permanently suspected of links with the mafia organization First Capital Commando (PCC). “Crooks” also encompass Lula voters, often associated with “drug dealers” in the favelas. Finally, they include all international players who have criticized the ousted president, in particular Brazilian and foreign human rights and environmental NGOs, as well as the “communist” Emmanuel Macron. By contrast, the ongoing denunciation of “crooks” helps to build Jair Bolsonaro’s image. He is valued for his “honesty,” backed by his non-involvement in the monthly payments and *Lava Jato* affairs. His virtue would also stem from the values he upholds—that of family and Christianity. Like Trump in the US, Bolsonaro is partly deified by some activists, who describe him as a “God-chosen” representative<sup>55</sup>.

These “crooks” are subject to multiple denunciation practices. The occupation participants transmit to each other, daily via WhatsApp or telegram, a considerable number of videos and digital content in which opponents are associated with crime, enrichment and decadence. They also produce videos of the occupation, associating these images with personalized comments about electoral fraud, the immorality of Lula and the PT, or the dictatorial regime in Brazil, then send them to their digital acquaintance networks. Occasionally, denunciation changes to face-to-face intimidation when people are identified as opponents and asked to leave the square, with the help of police officers as we have already mentioned, or when passers-by express their opposition and are persistently booed and branded “thieves” until they walk away<sup>56</sup>.

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54 Aldrin P., *Sociologie politique des rumeurs*, Paris, PUF, 2005.

55 Berry D., “Voting in the Kingdom: Prophecy Voters, the New Apostolic Reformation, and Christian Support for Trump”, *Nova Religio*, vol. 23, n°4, 2020, pp. 69-93.

56 Field note, November 11, 2022.



Insults and individualized disqualification is at the heart of the denunciation, aiming to point out the cited person's moral inferiority rather than specify or recall the accusations or offenses that the opponents have allegedly committed. Shaming, particularly digital shaming<sup>57</sup>, plays a key role in the daily life of the square. A collective message sent late January by a 62-year-old reservist and former navy captain whom we met on the square illustrates the rhetoric adopted:

The tireless crook hunt.

One gets the impression that the Brazilian people will not peacefully accept the ballot box fraud imposed by the TSE [Superior Electoral Tribunal], which has raised to the Presidency of the Republic a thief without morals, a "man" without any scruples. The term "man" is not quite appropriate because Lula is nothing less than a villain, a common thief and a scoundrel, an abject being morally disqualified [...] Worse, the thieving, cachaça-drinking, nine-fingered, shameless crook has already undone everything his predecessor achieved.<sup>58</sup>

The moral inferiority of adversaries must justify the use of alternative means of judging misdemeanors and crimes. Several reservists told me that the only way to solve the issue of the "gang" occupying Brazil's political and judicial institutions is for its members to be tried by the Superior Military Tribunal<sup>59</sup>. Hebert, a 68-year-old retiree from a well-off Niterói district who runs an auto hardware company, supports the same proposal but concludes that they should be shot, which he illustrates with a hand gesture<sup>60</sup>. An Army reservist asked me where I was from, and said: "I'm not afraid to say it, but if I see French NGOs in the Amazon, I'll kill them. Yes, I'll kill them"<sup>61</sup>.

Highlighting the moral inferiority of opponents depends only very partially on actually proven criminal acts, but rather, and perhaps above all, on the construction of an imaginary "evil," which Bolsonaroism has associated with the left. This imaginary is based on a hybridization between the Cultural Marxism thesis and a religious framing of political confrontation. Cultural Marxism, a thesis elaborated by North American authors, was imported to Brazil by Olavo de Carvalho and then widely disseminated in liberal and conservative digital communities. According to this thesis, the left no longer conquers power through revolution but through

57 Loveluck B., "Le vigilantisme numérique, entre dénonciation et sanction. Auto-justice en ligne et agencements de la visibilité", *Politix*, vol. 115, n°3, 2016, pp. 127-153.

58 Message sent by J. via WhatsApp, January 27, 2023.

59 Field Notes, November 6, 2022.

60 Field Notes, November 18, 2022.

61 Field Notes, 4 November 2022.

a diffuse, cognitive and normative influence, in line with Gramsci's teachings<sup>62</sup>. Several participants from traditionalist or evangelical Catholic churches associate this "theory" with religious interpretations of politics, according to which demonic forces act to destroy societies, and these forces can only be warded off by faith and respect for divine commandments. One commonly hears on the square that leftists defend pedophilia and that activists are mobilizing to protect children, that Lula is an envoy of the devil or that there will be "bloodshed" in reference to Hebrews 9:22.

## A MILITARIZED PROTEST

The Occupation duality between peaceful protest and calls for armed intervention depends in part on the borrowing of categories and concepts from the military milieu. The result is a strong emphasis on individual sacrifice for the country, and regular recourse to the "infiltrator" figure to end disagreements between participants. Military influence on the occupation reflects the interweaving of Bolsonaro's collective action logics and the militarization of political life.

### "Die for Brazil"

The military played an important role in structuring Bolsonaro in Rio de Janeiro. Jair Bolsonaro has built his political career as a Rio state deputy with support from a section of the military electorate<sup>63</sup>. His candidacy for the presidency also enjoyed the support of the military hierarchy<sup>64</sup>. It has also been accompanied by a significant influx of military personnel into politics. In 2018, 27% of candidates in Rio's statewide legislative elections came from the armed forces<sup>65</sup>. Such militarization of the political game is accompanied by the borrowing of

62 Chirio M., Noûs C., "La victoire de Bolsonaro à la lumière de l'histoire brésilienne", *Sens public*, 2020, <http://www.sens-public.org/articles/1458/#mise-en-coh%C3%A9rence-dimaginaires-conservateurs>. Accessed April 29, 2023.

63 Santos E. H. de J., "Controle civil? A ascensão de Bolsonaro e a encruzilhada do Brasil -militares, Forças Armadas e política", in Roberto Martins Filho J., *Os militares e a crise brasileira*, São Paulo, Alameda, 2021 (Kindle version).

64 Godoy M., "Soldados influenciadores. Guerreiros digitais e os tuíte de Villas Bôas", in Roberto Martins Filho J., *Os militares e a crise brasileira*, *op. cit.* (Kindle version)

65 Sa Vilas Boas M. H., "New candidates for old politics? Bolsonaro's in Rio de Janeiro," paper presented at the Congress of the International Political Science Association, Lisbon, June 2022.

practices, concepts and aesthetics specific to the military field, exacerbated in the Duque de Caxias square.

In Rio, it is mainly reservists, authorized to express their political opinions publicly, who take over the camp and reside there day and night. On the square, we come across “red berets,” i.e., former paratroopers, men dressed in military garb, and women involved in certain Bolsonarist organizations and/or who are part of the military entourage. On the forecourt, where campers and participants gather for the day, the music played is all from a military repertoire: flag anthems, pioneer (*bandeirantes*) anthems, soldiers’ anthems. The same goes for the slogans chanted all day long, in particular an excerpt from the Independence anthem, usually initiated by a demonstrator at the microphone: “Either keep the Fatherland free,” followed by a chorus of participants, “Or die for Brazil.”

Such major presence of reservists goes hand in hand with the enhancement of the military’s self-image. The five reservists we met describe their institution as a place for socializing in a way of thinking about the common good, and therefore in a political ethic. Their socialization is opposed to that of civilians, who are seen as corrupt and self-interested. The same conception helped justify the 1964 coup<sup>66</sup>. It is more widely shared by the square demonstrators, whether or not they come from the armed forces. According to our interviewees, the military’s demanding training makes them particularly well-suited to intervene in politics, reduce corruption in the political system and ensure social and political order. Indeed, most respondents reject the term “military dictatorship” to describe the regime established in 1964. They mainly cite security and the quality of Brazil’s education system, themes that attest to the new right’s reinterpretation of the dictatorship.

Military influence is also manifested in the constant valorization of individual “sacrifice” for the country, which can involve taking up arms to fight “enemies,” as illustrated by one of the conflicts we witnessed:

I make my way to the square and sit down in the center, next to a group of women. A few meters away is a loudspeaker truck with two people on its roof, a man and a woman bearing military aesthetics. The man rallies the crowd at the microphone: “Armed forces,” and the crowd responds: “Save Brazil.” He continues, “If we have to die?”; the crowd responds, “We will die”; the man at the microphone continues, “If we have to kill?”; the crowd responds, “We will kill!” The man concludes with “We want free...,” and the crowd choruses “dom!” This question-and-answer game is repeated a good fifteen times, and the crowd responds fervently.

Next to me, two women start fidgeting. The first, in her sixties, wears a large religious

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66 Chirio M., *La Politique en uniforme : l’expérience brésilienne, 1960-1980*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016.

medallion on her chest; the second, in her thirties, holds a rosary in her hand. For almost ten minutes, we have been hearing the crowd respond “we will kill” to the organizer’s call. The older woman calls out to the organizer: “Hey, fool, we won’t kill anyone, okay?” Her neighbor raises her rosary and adds, “Our weapon is God.” Female demonstrators look at them and give a thumbs-up in approval. My neighbor with the medallion continues, speaking very loudly, “Is he an infiltrator or what? If the Supreme Court hears about this, they’ll say we want to kill.” The square becomes so raucous that the organizer is removed from the microphone. He is replaced by a woman pastor who begins a collective prayer evoking union. A discussion takes place at the truck’s foot, bringing together militants bearing a military aesthetic. I can see from afar that the discussion is confrontational. An activist calls me over to inform that a man was recording the conversation I had with my neighbors on his phone. The organizer then took the microphone to apologize publicly, claiming to be tired from 19 days of demonstrations, his words having exceeded his thoughts. He claims that the point of his speech was to remind us that “they” want a civil war, “not us”; that “they” are dangerous, “not us.” Following this intervention, several women argue with my neighbors to show that they ignored the meaning of the phrases repeated by the crowd.<sup>67</sup>

This conflict illustrates that borrowing the most violent military practices is not a matter of course for all those involved in these demonstrations. But while they disagreed on “killing” their opponents, most participants are in favor of liberalizing the carrying of firearms. Envisioning disarmament as a means of weakening populations and preserving “crook” control, Bolsonaro voters define firearms as a self-defense tool, either in response to individual aggression—such as rape or invasion of property—or to rise up against a “dictatorial” regime. In fact, it was to challenge Brazil’s “dictatorship” that unarmed Bolsonaro supporters ransacked institutions in Brasilia on January 8, 2023. This action was immediately followed by a denial of responsibility among radical Bolsonaroists.

### **Purge the “infiltrators”**

During the two-month demonstrations, many occupation participants were convinced that action against Lula was underway, but that it was being postponed for strategic reasons. In early December, Hebert mentioned rumors of an attempt on Lula’s life scheduled for December 19. By late December, an organizer was on the microphone saying that the collective effort would not exceed 50 days, and that a happy ending would probably take place before Christmas. Then it was the January 1 inauguration ceremony that was the talk of the square. On January 3, during a discussion with Hebert and Maria, I pointed out that Bolsonaro hadn’t done anything after all and left for the United States, prompting an immediate reaction from my interlocutors: “Who says he hasn’t done anything?”

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<sup>67</sup> Field Notes, November 19, 2022.

Hence, the ransacking of institutions by Bolsonarists from all over Brazil came as no “surprise” to the occupation participants in Rio, as “something” had been predicted for months. But more important than the preparation and the act itself—a process whose contours I have no knowledge of and which it is not for me to retrace—is the reaction to the event: on the evening of January 8, 2023, when several Bolsonarist elected officials intervened to condemn the invasion, messages immediately circulated on social media explaining the ransacking by the infiltration of leftists. The former navy captain already cited, for example, sent me a collective message, an excerpt of which I quote here:

Congressional invasion stunt revealed:  
 It’s all just a well-orchestrated stunt by the PT gang.  
 They were frightened of all these people in front of Congress, with more and more people coming from all over. Lula knew he couldn’t get these people out of there because of the international repercussions of any violence against families with Brazilian flags. Plus, how was Congress going to work with millions of people outside? With a clear objective, they infiltrated “black blocs” in the midst of these peacefully protesting families and at one point were asked to enter Congress, generating what is called a “herd effect,” where one follows the other by instinct.  
 These infiltrators have been assured that nothing will happen to them legally, since in the end, with Xandão [nickname given to the Supreme Court minister, Alexandre de Moraes] on the front line, it will be easy to clear their names.<sup>68</sup>

This message, which blames the PT, Lula and the Supreme Court for the looting, allows us to analyze a final aspect of the Duque de Caxias square occupation, namely the regular mobilization of the “infiltrator” within it. This figure plays several roles. The first, illustrated by the excerpt above, is to avoid prosecution by denying the facts of which Bolsonaro supporters are accused, in particular acts against the law. A supposed infiltrator is thus evoked to preserve the imaginary of a democratic movement respectful of legality, bringing together “families” trapped and drawn, in spite of themselves, into a logic of destruction. But the infiltrator is also part of military rhetoric. It refers to some of the practices adopted by military police to gather evidence against criminal organizations<sup>69</sup>. It is also a category historically used to designate the presence, within the armed forces, of actors qualified as a threat to both the institution and the country. In the 1960s, fears of Communist infiltration of the army were constantly voiced<sup>70</sup>.

<sup>68</sup> Message from J. sent by WhatsApp, January 08, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Giraldes A. C. A., “O Instituto da infiltração no inquérito policial militar: implicações no combate de organizações cirminosas veiculadas por policcias militares”, *Revista dos Tribunais*, vol. 960, 2015, disponible sur le site du Ministère public de l’État de São Paulo, [http://www.mpsp.mp.br/portal/page/portal/documentacao\\_e\\_divulgacao/doc\\_biblioteca/bibli\\_servicos\\_produtos/bibli\\_boletim/bibli\\_bol\\_2006/RTrib\\_n.960.09.PDF](http://www.mpsp.mp.br/portal/page/portal/documentacao_e_divulgacao/doc_biblioteca/bibli_servicos_produtos/bibli_boletim/bibli_bol_2006/RTrib_n.960.09.PDF). Accessed April 30, 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Patto Sá Motta R., *Passados presentes. O golpe de 1964 e a ditadura militar*, op. cit., chap. 1 (Kindle version).

This classic figure of security circles, which evokes deception and subversion, is particularly mobilized during disagreements in the Duque de Caxias square to preserve the image of an indisputable unity. Accusations of infiltration were regular among participants during the two-month demonstration. For example, in the aftermath of one of Jair Bolsonaro's rare post-election speeches in December 2022, in which he ambiguously claimed to be the head of the armed forces <sup>71</sup>, two groups clashed over the meaning of this speech. For some, it was addressed to them, the activists now having to publicly assume their support for Jair Bolsonaro to avoid a power takeover by another individual. Others defended a more discreet stance to avoid any prosecution against their representative. This conflict, symbolized by the chanting of different slogans on both sides of the square for some thirty minutes, gave rise to reciprocal accusations of "infiltration," with some going so far as to suspect that about forty campers fell into the category of infiltrators <sup>72</sup>. Regular reference to this figure helped build the movement's internal unity while revealing its authoritarian dimension. Anything that might provoke disagreement (be it an idea or an individual) is symbolically placed outside the group and associated with the "crooks" that Bolsonaro voters propose to fight. Such process must be related to the heterogeneous groups taking part in the demonstration: reservists, security professionals, conservative organizations, religious groups, isolated voters. While united behind general Bolsonarist slogans, these actors do not share the same concepts of collective action, thus their mobilization leads to the coming together of distinct, even contradictory, practices and conceptions. The result is a permanent avoidance of debate or criticism.

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The post-election occupation in Rio de Janeiro illustrates some of the characteristics of radical Bolsonarists, namely the interweaving of collective action dynamics and military practices. In fact, while the movement reproduces a non-violent protest repertoire, the occupation is backed by a call for ousting an elected official by force. While participants strive to demonstrate their civility in public and in so doing, their democratic ambitions, they dehumanize

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<sup>71</sup> Speech made on December 09, 2012. Cf. Durães M., Gomes B., "Bolsonaro mantém o tom de antes da eleição e diz chefiar as Forças armadas", *UOL notícias*, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2022/12/09/primeira-fala-apoiadores-bolsonaro-diz-ser-chefe-forcas-armadas.htm>. Accessed January 12, 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Field notes, 10 December 2022.

opponents whom they intend to punish by extralegal means. Finally, although they claim the principle of freedom of speech, the demonstration is marked by a constant avoidance of debate. Some authors view this game of opposites as the expression of a strategy derived from military doctrines. Such is Piero Leirner's thesis, who interprets the practices of Bolsonaro supporters in light of the theory of hybrid warfare taught in military institutions. According to this theory, the boundaries between wars waged by states and non-state players are now blurred. Hybrid warfare have a psychological dimension and is based on the deliberate creation of a state of confusion by dissemination of contradictory messages and the designation of a common enemy<sup>73</sup>. This analysis, which considers the practices of certain Bolsonarist representatives, must however be complemented by a study of the diverse actors making up the branch represented by Jair Bolsonaro. In the Duque de Caxias square, the major presence of individuals from military backgrounds led to the borrowing of a warlike conception of collective action. But other actors see their commitment as a continuation of non-violent activist repertoires or religious practices centered on prayer. However, these players do not necessarily share the same concepts of collective action. Their union is essentially based on the same activity of denouncing the left and promoting the figure of Jair Bolsonaro.

Lastly, involvement in the demonstration impacted those who were mobilized over the long term, particularly those who resided in the enclosed space of the camp. While some campers posted photos and videos of their commitment on social media for two months, extolling their sacrifice for the country, these same individuals saw the dismantling of the camp on January 9, 2023, from the angle of authoritarian repression. This raises the question of whether these actors, who are heavily involved in contesting the outcome of the 2022 election, will accept Lula's third term in office.

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<sup>73</sup> Leirner P. C., "Da campanha à conquista do Estado: os militares no capítulo da guerra híbrida brasileira", in Martins Filho J. R., *Os militares e a crise brasileira, op. cit* (Kindle version).