# Fake News, Memes, and the Unconscious Production of Paranoid Utterances

### Lou Caffagni[[1]](#footnote-2)

*‘*The 'collective imbecile' is not, indeed, the mere sum of a certain number of individual imbeciles. It is, on the contrary, a collectivity of people of normal or even superior intelligence that come together, driven by a common desire to stupefy themselves and each other. Whether the desire is conscious, or unconscious is not important.*’*

– Olavo de Carvalho[[2]](#footnote-3)

*‘Olavo is right‘*

– Bolsonarist catchphrase

Jair Bolsonaro was elected in 2018 and since then, he has been spreading conspiracy theories against the electoral system in Brazil thus discrediting the very process that brought him to the presidency. He has claimed on numerous occasions that ‘only God could remove him from the presidential chair’. Michele Prado[[3]](#footnote-4) has described the messianic imaginary that surrounded Bolsonaro's government, where some circles considered him as a leader ‘chosen by God to win an electoral war’[[4]](#footnote-5). Thus, when Lula da Silva's victory was announced on October 30, 2022, Bolsonaro's followers quickly blocked highways and put into practice the coup d'état that they had already been planning for four years since Bolsonaro took power. With the support of the Federal Highway Police and Military Police, truck drivers occupied roads and highways, halting the circulation of people and goods and choking the main cities of the country. The blockades were only lifted weeks later thanks to the action of football supporters who when the Brazilian national football championship resumed were eager to attend the matches and support their teams. To access the stadiums, they had to clear the way from the Bolsonarist barricades. Even the most fanatical supporters of Bolsonaro could not stand in the way of the Gaviões da Fiel, or, the Faithful Hawks, the organized fan union of Corinthians.[[5]](#footnote-6)) Someone could say, perhaps, that God sent the ‘faithful Corinthians’ to spread His wisdom and will: ‘Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.’[[6]](#footnote-7)

However, hatred also persists, and the insurrectionists, having been pushed off the road blockades, then moved to the entrances of military headquarters in nearly every Brazilian city, setting up camps and protests calling for military intervention. For two months, they held their ground, many of them losing their jobs and families to be able to live in the camps permanently, while others came back and forth from the camps every day, often bringing their children. Their participation was fueled by social media messages with photomontages about military operations, movements of tanks, soldiers, and equipment that supposedly had never been seen in Brazil's history. In the meantime, Bolsonaro hid in the Presidential Palace, refusing to acknowledge his defeat. A few days before the end of his term, he flew to Florida with his family.

On January 8, 2023, one week after Lula da Silva's inauguration, Brasilia was taken over by barbarian invaders wearing yellow and green shirts, calling for a military coup to reinstate Bolsonaro as the ‘rightful’ and ‘God-sent’ president. In this essay, I will try to understand how so many seemingly reasonable people joined this radical pro-Bolsonaro social movement influenced by grotesque memes, fake news, and conspiracy theories.

The kernel of alt-right conspiracy theories became known in alt-right circles as ‘cultural Marxism’. But what the hell is that? Conservative scholars like Paul Gottfried (founder of paleo conservatism), Michael Minnicino (infamous creator of cultural Marxism), and James Davison Hunter (who theorizes the cultural war),[[7]](#footnote-8) alt-right influencers like Bolsonaro’s political advisor Olavo de Carvalho[[8]](#footnote-9), and specialists in international relations, such as Brazilian diplomat and former Foreign Minister Ernesto Araujo[[9]](#footnote-10), all believe that communism conquered the Western world after the Berlin Wall fell. They argue that the fall of the Berlin Wall gave communism the edge in the cultural battlefield of the Cold War, allowing communist agents to perpetrate their secret purposes in an open field. However, they remain convinced that communism's true aim was not the proletarian revolution. Instead, the aim is to attack traditional Western values, break down families, and increase government control over the economy and personal freedoms. According to them, today, communists are CEOs of multinational companies, such as Bill Gates and George Soros, media corporations such as *NBC*, *CBS* (USA), *Globo* (Brazil), and *BBC* (UK), as well as most journalists, popular artists, judges, and politicians. As in the ‘Purloined letter’ in Poe’s famous short story, ‘they hide in plain sight’.[[10]](#footnote-11) Inspired by this type of far-right propaganda, in 2018, Brazilian conservative groups spread false rumors on social media about a so-called gay kit being distributed in schools to promote homosexuality. This gay kit was a fake news piece accusing left-wing politicians of distributing insidious educational material to promote a gay lifestyle as part of what the alt-right called ‘gender ideology’. What was the star attraction of this fictional pedagogical kit’? A phallic-shaped baby bottle they named the ‘cock bottle’.



Figure 1: Still image from a social media video showing a prototype of the phallic feeding bottle. Source: Facebook. Iconografia da História

These groups claimed, without any evidence, that communist agents had infiltrated the media, the courts, and the elite in Brazil, who in turn manipulated the election to ensure Lula da Silva's victory. They claimed that communist agents had secret rooms inside the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court (TSE), contaminated electronic voting machines with malware, and also helped to spread disinformation against Bolsonaro and his supporters to justify their actions. They argue, based on an obscure interpretation of Article 142 of the Brazilian constitution, that the army's true mission was to moderate between the legislative, executive, and judicial powers.[[11]](#footnote-12) However, their true plan was to instigate social chaos by paralyzing roads, attacking the seat of government power, stopping public services, and through enough pressure, forcing Lula da Silva to call the army so they could overthrow its commander-in-chief and president and thus declare military rule.

In this turmoil, fake news played a decisive role in the failed coup attempt, just as it did in the events of the Capitol Riot two years earlier in the USA. The universe of fake news is driven by a delusionary discourse that has a significant presence in the academy, politics, and other institutions.

## Rhetorics, Philosophy, and Memetization

The relationship between image, mimesis, and political discourse are as old as philosophy itself. Even though memes and fake news are considered contemporary media and political phenomena bolstered by the rise of algorithmically driven social media platforms, the reflection on the political dimension of images in ancient Greece remains relevant. In Gorgias, Plato[[12]](#footnote-13) recounts a dialogue between Socrates and Callicles about rhetoric. Calicles, a sophist, argues that rhetoric is a specialized art that aims to convince and persuade the audience to achieve political goals. He believes that rhetoric is essential for educating political leaders to govern the polis and exert power over fellow citizens. A good rhetorician, as Calicles argues, must have a deep understanding of the nature of passions and use them wisely. Socrates, on the other hand, considers rhetoric to be an inferior art because, while it can persuade, it is incapable of revealing the true essence of things. Aristotle[[13]](#footnote-14) had a slightly higher opinion of rhetoric. For him, rhetoric was not just an art form but also a necessary tool in political decision-making, and legal processes, even though rhetorical syllogism is inferior to scientific syllogism. Cicero[[14]](#footnote-15) takes it a step further and emphasizes that rhetoric plays a fundamental role in the political education of citizens. My thesis is that memetic rhetoric is not like traditional rhetoric, but rather a simulacrum of rhetoric, or, to put it in another way, rhetoric is to memetic discourse as journalism is to fake news; it is a void and seemingly mimesis, a meta-mimetic genre.[[15]](#footnote-16)

According to Cicero,[[16]](#footnote-17) true rhetoric does not ignore reality, but rather integrates the discourse (*verba*), knowledge about its subject, things (*res*), and the context or the audience of the discourse. Rhetoric is not merely a manipulation of emotions but a discourse that connects knowledge and communication techniques. Pericles' speeches are a perfect example of this conception of rhetoric. Although he seeks to convince the audience, his discourse mobilizes a series of knowledge. Pericles was efficient only insofar as he concatenated a set of knowledge and facts to communicate the truthfulness of the events.[[17]](#footnote-18) Classical rhetoric aims to persuade the crowd’s infatuations by referring to certain facts and through a set of knowledge and techniques. Its uses and strategies depend on a certain knowledge of the subject, political action, and human emotions, even if it is merely instrumental.

In *Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze argues that the true opposition in Platonism is not between immutable ideas and their mundane copies, but between these copies and simulacra.[[18]](#footnote-19) Simulacra are copies of copies, representations of sensible things that are themselves imperfect copies of immutable ideas. There is a hierarchy of mimetic devices that starts in the transition between ideas and sensible beings and ends in the transition between these beings and their copies. Simulacra are like paintings of nature that resort to technical gimmicks to produce effects of resemblance. They generate resemblances through optical illusions. If philosophy seeks to recognize the immutable essence of being by looking up to the perfect realm of ideas, by contrast, rhetoric is more concerned with humans, as faulty copies of the ethereal ideal of Humanity. Philosophy and rhetoric thus represent two opposing forms of discourse and communication in the political realm. On the one hand, the search for truth, on the other, the realm of appearances. However, the true division is not between populist rhetoric and technicism, but between these two types of communication and the trend of memetizing political discourse.[[19]](#footnote-20) Memes are cultural forms that emerged with the Internet and include imitations of arguments, news, or opinions mainly in visual form but sometimes incorporating texts. Their true essence lies in their ability to spread and replicate like a virus. The mainstream media journalistic form is hijacked by alt-right groups to subvert the truth in the form of memes and fake news.[[20]](#footnote-21)

In a different methodological approach, but one equally rooted in the concept of cultural or semiotic contagion between the two realms, Richard Dawkins, a North American scholar, introduced the term meme (derived from the supposed theory of memetics), or ‘mind virus’. According to this theory, the meme is the ‘basic unit of imitation’, capable of reproducing a cultural repertoire, much like a gene reproduces a biological structure. However, the virus operates in both directions, contributing to the saturation of culture through media images.[[21]](#footnote-22)

Like classical rhetoric, memes aim to affect the audience's emotions, but they do so on a different level. Memes do not depend on a rational construction of arguments whereas rhetoric acts on the emotions of self-interested individuals, which can be understood rationally. Rhetoric mimics the philosophical syllogism,[[22]](#footnote-23) memetic discourse is a vulgarization of classical rhetoric, it is a simulacra of truth discourse. Classical rhetoric and memetic discourse are based on resemblance, the difference between them is that while rhetoric seeks to convince and manipulate, memetic discourse and fake news seek to deceive and falsify. As such, rhetoric plays with rational fears and hopes. How then do memes such as the cock-pacifier or the fake news that announce, for instance, Michel Foucault as an advisor to the Brazilian Minister of Justice mobilize the passion of the Bolsonarist audience? How can these meme-driven discourses drive thousands of people to an uprising, jeopardizing their freedom, jobs, savings, and even their lives?

An analysis of Bolsonarist symbolism can shed light on the nature of their memetic discourse. For instance, we could consider two strategic symbols: the large yellow and green phallus balloon displayed at several protests on Avenida Paulista, one of São Paulo’s main avenues, and the epithet *imbrochável* – a neologism in Portuguese meaning unbreakable but which in this context designates someone who never loses an erection and is always ready to perform sexual acts – assigned by Bolsonaro himself and his supporters on an Independence Day celebration rally while the presidential campaign was in full swing in late 2022. The fixation on the phallus and on the virility of the leader and the meme with phallus-shaped feeding bottles being introduced into toddlers’ mouths by nursery teachers, is an almost cheap and vulgar literary expression of the Freudian unconscious. In this way, the memetic communication of the alt-right mobilizes the collective unconscious of the crowd. According to Freud, drives and impulses are the substrates in which the identification process structures itself. These drives are emotions but do not respond to a reasonable imperative. The unconscious does not follow a sequential and rational concatenation, nor does it seek to arrange an argumentation as a successive chaining of thoughts. Rather, it concatenates signs following a mysterious and dreamlike order that is not readily assimilated into a logical sequence.



Figure 2: A still image from a social media video showing a phallic balloon displayed in Avenida Paulista protests. Source: Reddit, r/brasil.

It is for this reason that Freud chooses dreams as the main manifestation of the unconscious,[[23]](#footnote-24) while Deleuze and Guattari chose delusion as its perfect expression.[[24]](#footnote-25) Far-right memes in communication thus aim to reach unconscious structures and identification processes. As such, Bolsonarism mobilizes signifiers that either threaten or reinforce dominant identities (male, white, cisgender, middle/upper class, conservative) . Therefore, reality, rationality, or even argumentation are systematically denied by alt-right communities.

## The Production and Maintenance of Alt-right Paranoid Utterances

There is a set of conditions that orient the production of this kind of collective unconscious. Such communities operate within a framework of specific functional rules, akin to an autopoietic system that reproduces its essential internal elements and protects its borders from external intrusion.[[25]](#footnote-26) The communication process in these communities follows certain norms that enable their continuity, such as excluding or rejecting any communication that does not fit their core beliefs or diverges from them. Rational dialogue or doubt that threatens the integrity of the discourse is *excommunicated*, while communication is required to be intensive, continuous, and repetitive. The moderation device of alt-right digital communities does exactly the opposite of Socratic discourse. While the latter excommunicates or expels irrational and untruthful utterances, the former is not capable of dealing with utterances that contradict its own illusions and misleading arguments, thereby excluding all reasonable and critical discourse.[[26]](#footnote-27)

The main operative of these communities relies on information disorders performed through the usage of fake news, memes, and conspiracy theories, among others, that reinforce each other and occupy a large portion of its members' worldview. They create a totalizing worldview that both replaces and excludes previous assumptions that are not connected to, or that go against the group's discourse. The members of these communities often share racial, gender, and class prejudices, which serve as criteria for selecting new members. In addition, these communities tend to attack and exclude any member who diverges from their mental dispositions. If someone posts divergent opinions or tries to reason with the group, that is, uses critical thinking, they face public defamation, thereby reinforcing the group's beliefs and preventing dissent within the group.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that each society produces and manages its own image of the unconscious through certain social practices.[[27]](#footnote-28) In alt-right communities, these practices are primarily digital. Scholars have argued that social media operates like an echo chamber that amplifies, in this case, extreme political positions. The closed structure and algorithmic logic of social media platforms create an ideal environment for this kind of herd mentality. However, this structure is maintained through a set of unspoken rules. Michele Prado describes how these rules operate in WhatsApp communities and how they help in constructing echo chambers.[[28]](#footnote-29) According to Prado’s study, these groups exclude any communication that deviates from their beliefs and are known for organizing political persecutions against opponents or ex-members. They also refuse to engage in any dialogue that challenges their dogmatic positions. Moreover, they react aggressively to anyone who questions fake news or criticizes Bolsonaro's government. This ostracism can quickly escalate and spill over into the real world.[[29]](#footnote-30) Michele Prado, who was an active participant in these groups, was expelled, persecuted online, and received numerous death threats when she began to question Bolsonaro's measures on the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the traditional media presents information that threatens the integrity of a group’s discourse or identity, members of that group often respond by denying this information. They may disqualify journalists by conjuring up conspiratorial theories or labeling them as 'cultural Marxists'. For instance, when Bolsonaro supporters were confronted with scenes of violence during the failed coup in Brasilia on January 8th, 2023, they sought to repair the group's integrity by spreading fake news. They accused one of their own leaders of being an infiltrator for left-wing parties and shared a meme with alleged proof of infiltrated members in the riots. A meme circulated on social media during the riots, showing two pictures side by side. One picture was of a man in a yellow shirt, the color of the Brazilian football team, who appeared wounded and bleeding. The other picture was of a man hugging Lula. Some conservative social media communities claimed that it was the same man in both images, even though a quick look at the pictures would contradict this claim.

As Freud noted on many occasions, the unconscious often operates by denying unacceptable realities and projecting internal features onto external events. The construction of Bolsonarist discourse follows the same logic.[[30]](#footnote-31) They deny any reality that threatens their identity and discourse, projecting their own actions onto others, while accusing them of perpetuating the same acts for which they are to blame. In addition, they disseminate fake news and new waves of various conspiracy theories. To protect their beliefs, they accuse others of doing the same. As such, these communities operate as an autopoietic hermetic system. They are fed by memes and fake news produced by their members or by specialized communication professionals, and these communications shape and generate collective processes of identification. The system excludes any external element that represents a threat to it and could break the articulation of the continuum of communication.

Cognitive saturation is a crucial aspect of the Bolsonarist communication strategy, which involves circulating memes and other communications with a high degree of frequency, intensity, correlation, and repetition. To maintain this saturation, groups need to constantly feed the system with fresh content. Memes are crafted to elicit strong emotional responses that excite the fears, passions, and anxieties of the members, overloading their senses and producing acute agony as an effect. Fake news and memes usually revolve around specific subjects, such as the perceived threats to the traditional family, traditional values, and very often, the fear of a communist revolution, which resurfaces every week in new guises.

As Deleuze noted, repetition appears disguised through different manifestations of an event. In this way, memes and fake news make up a relational network of communication that support and confirm each other.[[31]](#footnote-32) Fake news relates to other fake news to compose a generalizable and totalitarian worldview, always referring to a mysterious and exotic causality to explain the multitude of effects and occurrences. João Cézar de Casto Rocha, states that opinions and motifs are repeated tautologically in the rhetoric of Olavo de Carvalho and his followers[[32]](#footnote-33). Memes must be shared, forwarded, and spread through social networks, and the threats to conservative values need to be constantly reaffirmed and reiterated.

In science, an *enunciate* is considered successful if it meets truth conditions, such as internal consistency and the principle of noncontradiction. However, conservative social media measures the success of a statement by how widely it circulates in a virtual space - the degree of engagement - as well as how strongly it elicits emotional responses from users. Therefore, the power of circulation lies in its capacity to emotionally impact the largest number of people. In this system, each individual functions as a node in a network, consuming, creating, and forwarding communication according to community parameters. A successful meme is not determined by how well it adheres to the parameters of a true utterance, but rather by its ability to mobilize the unconscious and anxieties of the crowd. Bolsonaro's supporters thus pervert the principle of noncontradiction in their discourse. While this principle traditionally refers to internal coherence, Brazilian conservatives use it to exclude any disturbances that could potentially threaten the identity and integrity of their communities.

Instead of evaluating the truthfulness of a statement based on its correlation with the internal structure of an observed phenomenon, in this case, it is based on the quality and reliability of the enunciator. Even if the utterance is absurd, it must be considered true if it is attributed to an authority or a familiar figure, typically a family man who is considered trustworthy. However, being trustworthy or having authority does not necessarily require having any kind of expertise, having social status, or avoiding self-contradiction. Rather, it is about being part of the same circle, sharing the same positions, and despising the same enemies. A reliable person in those circles is someone who never contradicts the discourse of the community. For instance, Abraham Weintraub, Bolsonaro's former minister of education, had his speeches and posts widespread and repeated in the extremist communities and was therefore considered a reliable and trustworthy authority figure in the first years of Bolsonaro’s term. When he broke apart with the movement his opinion became suddenly discredited and he became an enemy of the community. Rocha named this technique of dehumanization and discrediting of a political adversary a ‘nullifier disqualification’. The technique aims to deny the subjectivity of enemies and put them in a position of maximum alterity: ‘The effect is terrifying, as it authorizes the complete dehumanization of those who do not share one's own convictions. And since this is a technique - never forget it - the nullifying disqualification, as perfected by Olavo de Carvalho, was taught and multiplied by the myriad of right-wing YouTubers'.[[33]](#footnote-34)

João C. Rocha[[34]](#footnote-35) and Patrícia de Mello[[35]](#footnote-36) argue that Bolsonarism has a rhetoric based on hate. It is true that there is a discursive technique founded on hate, but it is less certain that this technique is purely rhetorical. Olavo de Carvalho developed his rhetorical-discursive techniques on his YouTube channel in the form of pseudo-philosophy lessons for his followers. However, there is no systematic development of his thinking. If we analyze Olavo de Carvalho's commentaries about his own style, it becomes clear that he never fully comprehends the nature or reach of his own techniques. His discursive technique is not a product of an explicitly elaborated art, as rhetoric is, but rather an organic and empirical development of certain traces of his personality in conjunction with YouTube media logic. It is true that this technique can be taught and indeed was taught. Olavo was a master of authoritarian discourse and could perfect the features of his dogmatic personality in a style of linguistic expression, but there is no explicit or systematic elaboration of this technique. His discourse is the perfect expression of a form shared by conservative, reactionary white men. The same strategies are used in chans, social media, online games, or any other digital spaces where these types of men find the occasion and a forum to express themselves.

Nonetheless, alt-right communication is not merely an accident of the unconscious. In addition to what became known as digital militias made up of anonymous supporters, communication under Bolsonaro’s government involved a coordinated political agency that resembled a military propaganda strategy. The coordination of digital Brazilian alt-right communication surpasses in many ways the strategies of left-wing parties. Although, the delusions are not an effect of these techniques, but inform them. Olavo de Carvalho, Bolsonaro, his sons, Ernesto Araújo (Chancellor of the government), Ricardo Salles (Environment Minister), and General Heleno (Defense Minister) really believed in the conspiracy theories they promoted, and they acted accordingly on many occasions. For instance, they purposely abandoned the Yanomami Indigenous people, letting them die of hunger because they actually believed that international organizations invented or manipulated the Yanomami ethnic group, localized on the frontier between Brazil and Venezuela, to take over control of the Amazon Forest. The armed forces even published a book called *The Yanomami Farce*[[36]](#footnote-37) that supports that thesis. Furthermore, Bolsonaro and Araújo jeopardized their own careers to support that COVID-19 was a conspiracy to attack individual liberties. Since the main goal of Bolsonaro’s term was reelection, his government was a series of motorcycle rallies, campaign speeches, and populist measures, but he bet all his chips on the thesis of the COVID-19 conspiracy. If he had adopted a reasonable policy during the pandemic, if he had not scorned dead and sick people publicly as he did, if he had not let seven hundred thousand people die, he would probably have been reelected. But why did he pose for pictures chasing the Esplanada’s emus with a box of chloroquine in his hands? Why would a well-established economist, such as Finance Minister Guedes, or a career diplomat, such as Araújo, jeopardize their reputation and liberty to support the bullshit of 'cultural Marxism'? Why would thousands of reasonable, ordinary people invade, occupy, and plunder public buildings to defend a coup? Because they really believe in these conspiracies, and because this discourse has been constructed since the end of the military dictatorship. Documents like the *Orvil Project,[[37]](#footnote-38)* a classified file that recounts a delusional version of Brazil’s history through a war between communists and patriots, and whose last chapter is the cultural war, was written in the 1970s and has been unearthed by the far-right.

Unconscious beliefs do not act alone in this war. Today, there is a pragmatic, systematic, and international organization of alt-right forces. Neoconservatives have emerged in many countries in the second half of the 20th century. Initially, they were fragmented and disconnected. In the US, they included the anti-communism of McCarthy in the 1950s, including the *John Birch Society* (founded in 1958), white supremacists, and later, Incels, Tea Party Organization, anti-immigration militias, and others. In France, they included the Front National (1972), the *Nouvelle Droite*, and the *Groupement de Recherche et d'Études Pour la Civilisation Européenne*, created in 1968. In Germany, there is the *Aktion Neue Rechte* (1972).[[38]](#footnote-39) In Brazil, leaders of the military dictatorship such as General Garrastazu Médici (president of Brazil between 1969 and 1974), General Ernesto Geisel (who followed Médici), as well as the infamous torturer Carlos Brilhante Ustra (to whom Bolsonaro dedicated his vote on Dilma Rousseff's impeachment),[[39]](#footnote-40) and more recently the ideologist Olavo de Carvalho and his disciples, and Jair Bolsonaro. Slowly and patiently, they have been infiltrating many social spaces in traditional parties, universities, armies, religious congregations, and schools.

While the internet is instrumental in the rise of conservative communities, many far-right scholars and ideologists have also published their worldviews in books and essays, often through respected academic publishers. For instance, Paul Gottfried, the founder of the paleoconservative[[40]](#footnote-41) movement, and James Division Hunter, the creator of the concept of 'cultural Marxism', are professors at US universities who have published works with some of the most important academic publishers in the US. A simulacrum device thus drives the discourse and communication of the alt-right. Conservative scholars often take scientific, sociological, and philosophical concepts and twist them into conspiratorial and delusional theories. They misinterpret the Gramscian concept of hegemony and the sociological concept of globalization as cultural Marxism and globalism, respectively, changing the moral signal value of original theories.[[41]](#footnote-42) Ideologists like Olavo de Carvalho then take these academic ideas and turn them into more accessible forms of communication.[[42]](#footnote-43) In their turn, social media influencers take these ideas and turn them into memes and fake news. This process is not straightforward and is not just one-way. While sometimes internet communicators can influence academics, in general, the communication process flows from scholars, politicians, and ideologues to internet communicators and lastly, the crowds. While the academic production of the alt-right constitutes a theoretical corpus, there is an unconscious guideline that runs through these theories that connects them to internet communities. Between the top and the bottom of this network, a series of translations and vulgarizations of conspiracy theories can be observed. This process is what I call a simulacrum process, driven by unconscious imperatives. Like Plato’s *simulacrum*, the process is driven by mimesis, as argued by Horbyk, Löfgren, Soriano, and Prymachenko, and where ‘imitation and mimicry are at the heart of ‘fake news’ just as Aristotelian mimesis is at the heart of fiction; but while a fictional text seeks to imitate life, ‘fake news’ texts imitate other texts, those of actual news. It is a meta-mimesis’.[[43]](#footnote-44)

The process can be described in four steps. First, conservative academics or organizations appropriate scientific and sociological concepts. For example, Gottfried and Hunter interpret Gramsci's concept of hegemony to create the idea of 'cultural Marxism', understood as a social and discursive battle of left-wing academics and politicians to gain dominance over the cultural and political realm. The second step involves alt-right politicians and ideologues translating this discourse into a more popular form of communication. In Brazil, the Bolsonaro family and Olavo de Carvalho are responsible for this transition. They simplify and amplify the conspiracy theories created in academia, foundations, and government agencies, and shape the discourse into a more populist style. The third step involves ideologues and politicians forming a sect of followers that will disseminate and broadcast their theories to a large audience through social media and other types of digital communication. The three first steps are financed directly by the organizations and parties involved in the two first steps. In the third step, there is an additional source of incoming links to monetization of social media channels. The fourth step refers to the action of the crowd of extremist sympathizers sharing and forwarding memes and fake news among their communities. The use of WhatsApp in Brazil is idiosyncratic, for it is a family tool for everyday communication. Thus, fake news and memes are forwarded in family groups aggregating a surplus of authority and reliability to the content shared.[[44]](#footnote-45) Several organizations, parties, and foundations finance these actions.

At this stage, memes and fake news are created collectively, and they come from various sources. Some memes are derived from conservative discourses in academia, while others emerge from common users at the bottom of the network. A significant number of them are created by disciples of ideologues or professionals of digital communication, who aim to manipulate the crowd. Nevertheless, this group creates pieces of communication as a strategy to support the 'cultural war' they believe they are fighting. The strategy of memes informed by conspiracy theories, oriented by collective paranoid delusions, is just one example of how it can be deployed.

## Final Remarks

The inner nature of memes involves their replicability, fluidity, and flexibility. A single conspiracy theory can take many forms through variations in memes and fake news. Elements related to sexuality and identity that strengthen collective identity and values are present at all levels. Conspiracy theories, as content, reiterate themselves through various communication formats, including fake news and memes. For example, the cock-pacifier meme is not a joke or an individual delusion. It is a materialization of the conspiracy theory of 'cultural Marxism' and globalism packaged as gender ideology, another term invented by far-right and other conservative forces. According to this delusional approach, international agents of socialism invest against family values to attack traditional institutions and destroy Western civilization. They manipulate the entire world to indulge their perverse desires. In some radical and extremist circles, these desires are portrayed as satanic and pedophilic, as is the case of the conspiracy of QAnon, also present in Brazilian communities. For less extreme groups, the aim of this left-wing elite is simply to control the world and inculcate an atheist, socialist, and unnatural morality in the population. In summary, this delusional conspiracy theory repeats itself across various levels of communication, starting as an announced tragedy and then evolving into farce or comedy, paraphrasing Marx[[45]](#footnote-46) and Deleuze.[[46]](#footnote-47)

If you were to meet one of the rioters of the January 8 Planalto Riots in a professional or social setting, you probably would not be able to tell that they would have the capacity to participate in a terrorist act such as the invasion of Brasilia. Bolsonaro's supporters are mostly middle-class and college graduates who have access to knowledge and specialized journalistic publications. The issue is not access to quality information, but rather an underlying rational issue. It is also not about brainwashing conspiracies, or propaganda as they are neither fooled nor alienated by a specialized master of communication. They act in their own interest, they are active in digital networks, and they consciously promote hate speech. They are as responsible for their decisions as anyone could be. Nonetheless, the unconscious is a fundamental dimension of politics. As Lacan says, desire is the essence of reality, and each person reaches the truth that they are capable of bearing.[[47]](#footnote-48) They integrate a closed belief system, an unconscious collective dispositif. When moved by this system/dispositif, they truly believe in the fake news and memes that they create.

By following military-specialized channels on YouTube during the first week of 2023, one could see a trove of seemingly journalistic pieces about army movements preparing for a coup. Even the Bolsonaro family's social media channels were filled with a multitude of hidden signals tailored to their audience, pointing to a big event, a great disruption. This means that the invasion was prepared and fed through social media to reach the masses to perpetrate a coup. Digital discourse, misinformation, memes, social media, and fake news are the substrate of the riots. They produce an unconscious mass reaction that leads to a violent uprising. Speeches enact concrete events, and they can express themselves in acts because the unconscious is made of discursive acts, and politics are always filled with desires.

## Bibliography

*‘Projeto Orvil’,* (n.d.), https://www.averdadesufocada.com/images/orvil/orvil\_completo.pdf.

Araújo, Ernesto. ‘Trump e o ocidente’, *Cadernos de Política Exterior* III.6 (Winter 2017): 323–358.

Aristotele. *Retórica e Poética*, Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 2004.

Barreto, Carlos Alberto L. M. *A farsa Ianomâmi*, Rio de Janeiro: Biblioteca do Exército Editora, 1995.

Bible Gateway. '1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NIV),' n.d., https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2013%3A4-7&version=NIV.

Carvalho, Olavo de. *O imbecil coletivo: Atualidades inculturais brasileiras,* São Paulo: Faculdade da Cidade Editora, 1997.

Cicerón. *De l'oratoire*, Livre III, 5.19, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Logique du sens*, Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Difference and Repetition*, New York: University of Columbia Press, 1995.

\_\_\_\_\_ and Guattari, Félix. *The Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Freud, Sigmund. *Negation*, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 6.4(1925):367–371.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Totem and Taboo*, London: Rutledge, 2001.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The interpretations of Dreams*, New York: BasicBooks, 2010.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Psycho-Analytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia paranoides)*, London: White Press, 2014.

Galloway, Alexander R., Wark, McKenzie, and Thacker, Eugene. *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Gottfried, Paul Edward. *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt, Toward a Secular Theocracy*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selection from Political Writings 1921–1926*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

Horbyk, Roman, Löfgren, Isabel, Soriano, Cheryll and Prymachenko, Yana. ‘Fake News as Meta-Mimesis: Imitative Genres and Storytelling in the Philippines, Brazil, Russia and Ukraine’, *Public Inquiry: The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture* 8.1 (2021): 30–54.

Hunter, James D. *Cultural Wars: The struggle to define America - Making Sense of the Battle over Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis. Book XVII*, New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.

\_\_\_\_\_. Écrits: a selection. London/New York: Routledge, 2001

Luhmann, Niklas, The Theory of Society. Vo. 1. Stanford: University of California Press, 2012.

Marx, Karl. ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, in Robert Tucker (ed.), T*he Marx-Engels Reader*, London/New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978.

Mello, Patrícia C. *A máquina do ódio: Notas de uma repórter sobre Fake news e violência digital*, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2020.

Minnicino, Michael J. ‘The Frankfurt School and ‘political correctness’. *Fidelio*, 1 (Winter 1992): 4–27.

Plato. *Gorgias*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.

Poe, Edgar A. ‘The Purloined Letter’, In: Edgar A. Poe, *The Murder in the Rue Morgue and The Purloined Letter*. Genoa: Black Cat Publishing, 1999.

Prado, Michele. *Tempestade Ideológica: Bolsonarismo, a Alt-right e o Populismo Liberal no Brasil*, São Paulo: Lux Editora, 2021.

Rocha, João C. C. *Guerra Cultural e retórica do Ódio: Crônicas de um Brasil pós-político,* Goiânia: Caminhos, 2021.

Sodré, Muniz. *Antropológica do espelho : uma teoria da comunicação linear e em rede,* Petrópolis: Vozes, 2002.

Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

1. PhD in education from University of São Paulo (USP), researcher at LECC-UFRJ and member of the Mário Schenberg Institute. E-mail: loucaf@gmail.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Olavo de Carvalho, *O imbecil coletivo: Atualidades inculturais brasileiras,* São Paulo: Faculdade da Cidade Editora, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Michele Prado, *Tempestade Ideológica: Bolsonarismo, a Alt-right e o Populismo Liberal no Brasil*, São Paulo: Lux Editora, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Michele Prado is a social scientist, former supporter of Bolsonaro, she participated in some Bolsonarist groups until the Covid Pandemics. When she began to question the government policies, she was persecuted by her fellow companions. In 2021, she wrote a book about her experience in Bolsonaro’s trenches. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. A union isn’t a common term to translate the organizations of fans of a club, but I believe is justified because of the social and political nature of this specific organization that has played a significant role in other recent historical events. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Bible Gateway, '1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NIV),' n.d. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2013%3A4-7&version=NIV. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See Paul Edward Gottfried, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt, Toward a Secular theocracy.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.; Michael J. Minnicino, *The Frankfurt School and ‘political correctness’*. *Fidelio* 1 (Winter 1992): 4–27; and James D. Hunter, *Cultural Wars: The struggle to define America - Making sense of the battle over family, art, education, law, and politics.* New York: BasicBooks, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Olavo de Carvalho was an astrologer and ideologue of the alt-right in Brazil. He has written numerous books criticizing the left-wing views, political correctness and supporting many alt-right leaders such as Trump and Putin. He influenced the emergence of Bolsonarism. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Ernesto H. F. Araújo, ‘Trump e o ocidente*’*, *Cadernos de Política Exterior* III.6 (Winter2017): 323–358. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Edgar A. Poe, ‘The Purloined Letter’, In Edgar A. Poe, *The Murder in the Rue Morgue and The Purloined Letter*. Genoa: Black cat Publishing, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Brasil, *Constituição Federal*, 1988. The article defines the constitutional role of the Army. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Plato, *Gorgias*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Aristotle, *Retorica e Poetica*. Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Cicerón, *De l'oratoire: Livre III, 5, 19*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Roman Horbyk, Isabel Löfgren, Yana Prymachenko, Cheryll Soriano. ‘Fake News as Meta-Mimesis: Imitative Genres and Storytelling in the Philippines, Brazil, Russia and Ukraine’. *Public Inquiry: The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture* 8.1 (Autumn 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Cicerón, *De l'oratoire. Livre III, 5, 19*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens.* Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. My thesis contradicts Plato's position on rhetoric. Plato asserts that rhetoric is a kind of simulacrum of episteme. However, in his theory of truth, he insists that opinion is distinct from an image and holds a superior position in the hierarchy of knowledge. Opinions are situated between images and rational argumentation. I argue that rhetoric is associated with opinion and the realm of politics, while memes are connected to artificial images; they serve as copies of opinionated arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Horbyk, Löfgren, Soriano and Prymachenko. ‘Fake News as Meta-Mimesis’. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Muniz Sodré, *Antropológica do espelho: uma teoria da comunicação linear e em rede.* Petrópolis: Vozes, 2002, p. 56. (Translated from the original) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Aristotele, *Retorica e Poetica,* Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese. 2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Sigmund Freud, *The interpretations of Dreams*, New York: BasicBooks, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *The Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Niklas Luhmann, *The Theory of Society*. Vo. 1. Stanford: University of California Press, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Alexander R. Galloway, McKenzie Wark, and Eugene Thacker, *Excommunication: Three inquiries in Media and Mediation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Deleuze and Guattari, *The Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Prado, *Tempestade Ideológica*. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Patrícia C. Mello, *A máquina do ódio: Notas de uma repórter sobre Fake news e violência digital*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras. 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. For example: Sigmund Freud, *Psycho-Analytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia paranoides)*. London: White Press, 2014; Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo.* London: Rutledge, 2001; Sigmund Freud, ‘Negation’, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 6.4, (July, 1925): 367-371. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition.* New York: University of Columbia press, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. João C. de C. Rocha, *Guerra Cultural e retórica do Ódio: Crônicas de um Brasil pós-político*, Goiânia: Caminhos, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Rocha, *Guerra Cultural e retórica do Ódio,* p. 160 (translated from original). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Rocha, *Guerra Cultural e retórica do Ódio.* [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Patrícia C. Mello, *A máquina do ódio.* [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Carlos Alberto L. M. Barreto, *A farsa Ianomâmi,* Rio de Janeiro: Biblioteca do Exército Editora, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. *Orvil* is a classified document produced by the Intelligence Service of the Brazilian Army in the 80’s. There is no date or author. The document has been circulating in many extremist communities since the 2000’s. The word *Orvil* is an inversion of *Livro*, which means ‘book’ in Portuguese. ‘Projeto Orvil’, https://www.averdadesufocada.com/images/orvil/orvil\_completo.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Michele Prado, *Tempestade Ideológica*. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. In 2016, the first woman president in Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, underwent an impeachment, accused of fiscal misconduct. Many scholars, jurists and activists pointed out irregularities in this process. Despite the process having followed the legal procedure outlined in the constitution, the analysis of the merits of the process was biased. In her place, Michel Temer assumed office, implementing a series of highly unpopular neoliberal measures. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Paleoconservatism is a academic stream of far-right movement, characterised by its opposition against immigration, globalisation, feminism and gay marriage. It opposes neoconservatives insofar as it rejects liberal policies and the globalization of economics. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from Political Writings 1921-1926*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Olavo de Carvalho, *O imbecvil coletivo: Atualidades inculturais brasileiras.* [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Horbyk, Löfgren, Soriano and Prymachenko. ‘Fake News as Meta-Mimesis’. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Horbyk, Löfgren, Soriano and Prymachenko. ‘Fake News as Meta-Mimesis’. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Karl Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’. In Robert Tucker (Ed.)*The Marx-Engels Readers*. London/New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978: 594-495. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*. New York: University of Columbia press. 1994: 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: a selection*. London/New York: Routledge, 2001 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)