

# Olavo de Carvalho and the Traditionalist Influence on the Structuring of Bolsonarism

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## ABSTRACT

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Considering the present situation of democratic backsliding observed in Brazil, it is crucial to understand the various forms of thinking that take place in the political debate as a condition for the production of this phenomenon. A former military officer, Jair Bolsonaro was often seen as the incarnation of a certain nostalgia for the dictatorship prior to his candidacy for the presidency, consistently aligned with the most conservative segments of the Brazilian society. As his campaign gains momentum in 2018, it rallies a wide range of sectors from the right, forging a rather paradoxical project, grounded by the opposition to the Brazilian political and intellectual establishment.

Standing out within these alliances is the figure of the essayist Olavo de Carvalho (1947-2022), the main ideologue of what has come to be called *Bolsonarism*, who contributed to rehabilitate the anticommunism of the military, giving it new consistency in a war against *cultural Marxism* (Miguel, 2019; Pinheiro-Machado, 2019). Believing that the liberal establishment would have taken control of the most diverse institutions, leading to the demolition of the Western civilisation, the essayist advocated for a strong response. Beyond a sort of *reverse Gramscism*, however, Carvalho's ideas seem to have been influenced by the Traditionalist thought, with which he came into contact through the Swiss metaphysician and spiritual master Frithjof Schuon (Sedgwick, 2019; Gandesha, 2020; Teitelbaum, 2021). Nourishing a form of opposition towards modernity and the values of Enlightenment, Traditionalism seems to have had a decisive weight in

the intellectual formation of Carvalho, who publishes his first political writings after attending Schuon's tariqa in the 1980s.

In view of the present momentum of far-right forces in Brazil and abroad, it seems important to analyse the circulation, translation, and appropriation of Traditionalist ideas through Carvalho's work. To assess their salience in Carvalho's work and the use of ideas inherited from Traditionalist thought by Bolsonaro and his allies, this research focus on the content of the author's production and the discourse of political actors closely related to him. This study aims to demonstrate that, even if some of them have remained central, these ideas have been limited by strategic considerations and the various ideological influences that fuse within Bolsonarist circles.

