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# FROM HOPE TO HATE: THE RISE OF CONSERVATIVE SUBJECTIVITY IN BRAZIL

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the voters of Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro in Morro da Cruz, a low-income community in Porto Alegre. The transition from *Lulism* (2002-2016) to *Bolsonarism* (2018-) was marked by the rise and fall of the economy and the collapse of the political system. Based on a 10-year longitudinal ethnography, we look at the effects of such major shifts at the national level on people's individual self and political subjectivity. More specifically, we investigate how and why the 'new consumers'—those who accessed the finance system during the Workers' Party (PT) Administration—came to support a far-right candidate. We argue that the inclusion of the poor into the market economy brought about individual empowerment and a sense of self-worth in the PT era – a process that was threatened by economic recession, unleashing an existential crisis, especially among men. Bolsonaro, as a male figure, and his campaign gave order to a changing world, resulting in a reconciliation of personhood and political belonging.

**KEYWORDS:** Jair Bolsonaro; far-right wing; masculinity; personhood; Brazil

## INTRODUCTION

Milton (aged 41 in 2018) was two years old when his house collapsed in a favela landslide in Porto Alegre, Brazil. He emerged from the rubble and became a construction worker “to build resistant houses for the poor” – as he says. For many years, he regretted the fact that he built others' houses but didn't have enough money to build his own. In 2012, under the Workers Party's (PT) administration, Milton finally bought a small plot of land, his wife received bank credit to buy building materials, and he constructed a modest house for his family. He also voluntarily improved the streets and houses and adopted abandoned dogs from the surroundings. “Then I became *gente* (literally someone, a person) for the first time”. In 2015, during the peak of Brazil's economic, political, and urban security crisis, an “extremely beautiful bandit who held one giant pistol on one hand and one rifle on the other”, as he says, suddenly arrived at his place and ordered the family to flee within 24 hours: the drug trafficking faction *Bala na Cara* (Bullet in the Face) was dominating that territory. He wanted to resist, but he gave up when he witnessed his neighbor being executed in front of his child. The only

thing he inherited from the house was debts. In 2018, he had two jobs (he was a security guard at night and a construction worker during the day) to save money to build a new house.

Milton is one of many of Porto Alegre's low-income citizens whose life was positively transformed – at least in terms of material comfort – by the financial inclusion policies that occurred under the left-wing PT's national administration (2003-2016). Yet, in a moment of despair and disillusion, he voted for the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 presidential race because, according to him, “PT helped bandits but not workers”.

In this paper, based on a 10-year longitudinal research – divided into two moments (2009-2014; 2016-2018) – we present an ethnographic account of adherence to Bolsonaro in the favela of Morro da Cruz (hereafter Morro), a low-income community in Porto Alegre. We investigate how the ‘new consumers’—those who accessed finance and credit systems in the Lula era, the very citizens that once symbolized Brazil's rise as a global democratic power and an emerging economy—came to support a far-right candidate. The transition from *Lulism* (2003-2016)<sup>1</sup> to *Bolsonarism* (2018-) was marked by the rise and fall of the economy, the collapse of the political system and the erosion of traditional political parties. Following Kleinman's (2011) perspective on the shaping of the moral person in times of rapid transformation, we seek to demonstrate how major political and economic shifts at the national level affected peoples' individual self, moral conditions, and political subjectivity.

This paper is a continuation of a previous publication (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, forthcoming), in which we discuss the first part of our fieldwork. In that work, we contended that *Lulism* was a moment of precarious hope and ambiguous political mobilization in the Morro. Financial inclusion was part of a modernizing process that transformed the personhood of local residents. Manufactured and branded goods mediated a process of class and racial individual empowerment through which low-income subjects became *gente*—deserving of visibility and respect (Perlman 2010)<sup>2</sup>. As we have previously argued, such policies, more specifically the so-called ‘inclusion via consumption’, brought about multiple, sometimes contradictory, political developments. On the one hand, it represented a gradual demobilization of the PT's popular base as the relationship between the state and the people became more

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<sup>1</sup> Lulism here means ‘Brazil under Workers' Party rule’, which includes the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff administrations.

<sup>2</sup> As Perlman noted, the marginalization of the poor excludes them from the concept of personhood. To be *gente* is to “be accorded the dignity and respect (...) The term points to the circumstances in which the poor simply do not exist in the mental map of the wealthy” (2010, p.313). Being *gente* is the opposite of being *um ninguém*—literary “a nobody”, which refers to the invisibility and dehumanization of the poor, their mark of non-personhood.

individualized and apolitical, meaning demanding less effort in building the collective. On the other hand, the access to consumption, coupled with the conditional cash transfer program Bolsa Família – a social benefit given directly to women – empowered minorities, especially black female citizens who secured the necessary autonomy to manage family expenses and acquire desired status objects.

When the economic recession began in 2014, these new commoditized ways of structuring personhood through consumption were threatened, resulting in a gendered crisis of self-worth. When we returned to the field site in 2016, we observed a gender bifurcation through which most of the women fiercely rejected Jair Bolsonaro, recognizing that their lives had improved under the PT administration. In contrast, several male interlocutors – the focus of this article – anxiously experienced a sense of “losing the world”, referring to the absence of a horizon with a shared common world (Latour 2018). Their “engrieved entitlement” (Kimmel 2017) increasingly inspired them to parrot conservative, individualistic, misogynic, and punitive worldviews that encountered *Bolsonarism*. In the end – we argue – the Bolsonaro male figure and his campaign, promises, and statements gave order to a changing world, promoting a sense of political belonging, and resulting in the reconciliation of such an existential crisis.

Finally, the paper is divided into two main parts – which are entitled ‘hope’ and ‘hate’ – each of them describing one phase of our longitudinal ethnography. The first moment of the research was conducted from 2009 to 2014 and analyzed the impacts of Lula’s financial inclusion on new consumers’ lives. We conducted participant observation among four key networks: an afro-Brazilian religious center located at the bottom of the Morro (in a wealthier zone); Karla’s (a black female micro-entrepreneur, then aged 34) family who lived at the top of the hill (in a poorer zone); the Murialdo School, a secondary school attended by students from all over the community; and, finally, Beco das Pedras, the poorest street of Morro. The second part of this paper presents the new moment of our research project, which began at the end of 2016 when we returned for a follow-up visit of the field site in its new political context. During 2017, we regularly visited the same people and places that we had previously studied, and, in 2018, we intensified fieldwork by conducting 17 focus groups with Bolsonaro voters, as well as engaging in online discussion groups to gain depth in the understanding of their political motivations.

## HOPE

Porto Alegre, capital of the southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul, is one of the paradigmatic places to investigate the rise of a far-right candidate in Brazil because it was the cradle of the Workers' Party's participatory budgeting (PB) in the 1990s and the site of the landmark World Social Forum in 2005. Not long before the election of Bolsonaro, the city was widely known as largely left-wing, 'a possible utopia', a model for the world of grassroots democracy at the local level (Junge 2018). However, in 2018, Bolsonaro won in all neighborhoods of the city, including the poorest ones<sup>3</sup>. Our ethnography took place in Morro da Cruz where approximately 30,000 people live, but this number does not include its many illegal settlements (Scalco 2012). Though it is generally considered one of the most impoverished areas of the city, there is a high level of economic diversity, ranging from lower-middle class families to those living in extreme poverty.

During the PT's administration of the city in the 1990s, PB meetings were intense and constituted a fundamental channel to foster new political subjectivities among the poor (Junge 2018). In the Morro, women were active political mobilizers. In 2002, Lula won the presidential race and started a new era for the party, coined by Singer (2012) as *Lulism*. After years of popular mobilization, this period was marked by poverty reduction and the adoption of social and financial inclusion policies. However, this phase of PT institutionalization also brought about depoliticization of the party base and gradual emptying of community forums, such as PB.

*Lulism* focused on empowering disadvantaged groups through visibility, recognition, and affirmative action. Consumption, financial inclusion, and the fact that the poor had access to air travel for the first time, for example, became a national emblem. In addition, the so-called 'new middle class' was a sociological phenomenon sustained by impressive yet controversial numbers (Klein, Mitchell and Junge 2018). This context led Brazil to resist the 2008 international economic crisis and the country reached its peak economic growth (7.5%) in 2010. Little by little, Brazil gained international respect as an emerging economy and democratic player in the world. It is worth noting that the verb 'to shine' was widely employed by academics and policymakers alike to describe this phase and its marked economic take-off (see Neri 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> In the electoral district of Morro, Bolsonaro defeated Fernando Haddad by a tiny difference, 50,12% x 49,88%

We critically analyzed hope not as a ‘banner for optimism’, but in concrete social settings and (geo)political moments (Kleist and Jansen 2015, p. 374). For a short time, Brazil’s economic take-off inspired international debates that celebrated a potentially incoming era characterized by a more democratic and multipolar world system, which allowed for reimagining new, brighter futures for the 21<sup>st</sup> century emerging countries. However, an ethnographic approach to the ‘Brazilian dream’ suggests that, in the context of poverty, hope in the future was precariously straddled upon a new, commoditized life.

In the paragraphs that follow, we will summarize some of our data and arguments (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, forthcoming) that present the findings of the first part of our ethnography. We explored how Brazil’s national momentum impacted the subjectivity of the poor by examining inclusion via consumption in Morro and collected stories that spoke of the importance of material goods, like branded clothes and electronic devices, in the making of personhood and even citizenship.

For example, Betinho (aged 16 in 2009) compared his first Nike brand cap to a hero’s cape by saying: *eu to podendo* [“I am empowered”]. I am no longer the invisible *favelado*”. Marta (aged 32 in 2010), a street vendor, said: “I like to buy designer clothes and go downtown with my head held high”. Like Marta, Karla (aged 42 in 2012) also stressed the importance of wearing genuine Ray Bans, although, according to her, racist white people would think her glasses were fake: “but I don’t care, I think I am a super-hot black woman”—she said. Clothing was also essential to Neli (aged 55 in 2010) who spent all of the the salary she earned as a domestic worker on fashion items for her 10 children: “I know they will not have the opportunity to study, to have a house, so dressing well is dignity, and dignity is the only thing I can give them”. Along a similar vein, DJ Maroba (aged 45 in 2014) told us that salesclerks in his favorite store ignored him because he was poor. When he received a social benefit notice, he went straight to the mall and spent it all on a pair of shoes. He told us that we couldn’t judge him he was not respected as a citizen at all, but buying the shoes was a form of existing: “Now that I paid in cash for the shoes, I go to the mall every week, I pass by the shop and the sellers say: Hello Mister Maroba. They say my name. It is like I exist”.

In June 2013, mass demonstrations against corruption and the soccer World Cup, and for better public services were held across over the country. Soon thereafter, in January 2014, the *rolezinhos* occurred— an event that summarized some of the political contradictions of *Lulism*’ inclusion via consumption. *Rolezinhos* were a flash mob carried out by black, poor, young, males in shopping malls (in Brazil, malls are often segregated places) visited by the white-middle class in several cities in Brazil, especially São Paulo, but also in Rio de Janeiro

and Porto Alegre. These youngsters went to malls in large groups<sup>4</sup> to have fun, to buy brand-name clothes, to sing funk music, and to date. Such gatherings attracted the attention of the national and international press, who wondered whether *rolezinhos* were a politically-oriented social movement. During our fieldwork, we followed several *rolezinhos* to observe complex yet ambivalent political events. For example, these young males had a strong political narrative of being persecuted by mall security guards, at times solely for being black and poor. Yet this sense of racism didn't revert into any form of political organization as their claim was merely the right to buy things.

These ethnographic events suggest that consumerism impacted personhood in profound ways. Through material goods, the historical invisibility and humility of the "subalterns" (Spyer 2017) were transmuted into pride at the individual, racial, and class levels. By breaking the long-standing slavery-pattern of subordination – such as domestic workers indebted to *patroas* (employees), receiving second-hand clothing and leftover food – certain groups, especially low-income black women (who received the social benefit Bolsa Familia) were daring to build their houses, to buy goods and access places they were traditionally not supposed to (i.e., malls, social elevators<sup>5</sup>). In a country with persistent inequality, racism, and structural violence, consumption became a key channel for obtaining respect, visibility, and recognition. Neli and Maroba's statements were reflective of paradigmatic cases in which material goods resolved an ontological existential question: it was a means to become *gente*.

Consumption impacted collective and individual aspirations. Through access to manufactured goods, our interlocutors challenged race- and class-based structures that perpetuated the monopoly held by the elite on distinction. Yet, in contrast to their parents' and grandparents' modes of collective organization (e.g., participatory budgeting), this process now occurred in a more diffuse, contradictory, and individualized manner. To adopt Streeck's (2012) terms, *socialization through politics*, which demands the investment of time in the collective, was being replaced with *socialization through consumption*, which is ephemeral and individualized. This kind of commoditized individual-level empowerment came with an awareness that citizenship remained incomplete. We observed a temporal disjunction between the *capacity to buy* and what Appadurai (1996) called the *capacity to aspire* to a better life.

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<sup>4</sup> The *rolezinhos* we followed in Porto Alegre were small, gathering about a dozen people. But in São Paulo some groups gathered hundreds of youngsters.

<sup>5</sup> In Brazil many buildings have two elevators, a Social Elevator, for residents and their guests, and a Service elevator for employees. In wealthy, predominantly white neighborhoods, it is often assumed that Black visitors to a building should use the Service elevator

While the former occurred in a short period of time, the latter followed at a slow and timid pace. Very few of our interlocutors started dreaming of getting better jobs or accessing higher education, and individual satisfaction came mainly from the acquisition of material goods. Brazil inaugurated a new era of national hope, but to many low-income subjects who lived in favelas, hope in the future went hand-in-hand with fear and a pragmatic understanding of structural constraints.

## **HATE**

Since we left the field site during the start of 2014, Brazil has undergone drastic changes. The mass demonstrations in June 2013 inaugurated an era of political instability. In 2014, the right-wing demonstrations in support of the impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff started, Brazilian cities hosted the World Cup, and Rousseff was narrowly reelected. This year also marked the commencement of the so-called Car Wash – a criminal investigation focused on corruption by the Federal Police – resulted in the imprisonment of former president Lula in 2018. In addition, a long period of economic recession began in 2014. The ‘Brazilian dream’ proved to be unsustainable in the long term: economic growth plunged from 7.5% in 2010 to -3.77 in 2015. Brazil was diving headfirst into a multidimensional crisis.

This state of limbo led to the degradation of daily life in Morro. In Porto Alegre in particular, this period coincided with one of the worst state public security crises, derived from a fierce dispute between drug trafficking factions – from which Milton’s (the interlocutor presented at the beginning of this paper) story is a consequence. In a short period of time, the grand narrative of this emergent country collapsed. When we returned to our fieldwork in November 2016, our interlocutors reported that they no longer had economic resources or access to credit. They were indebted to credit cards, banks, chain stores, and informal moneylenders. To some, the primary thing that the Lula era brought about was material comfort. However, without money, credit, and jobs, they could no longer acquire name brand clothes and electronic devices. Moreover, due to increased levels of urban violence, most interlocutors had lost items, especially cell phones, in everyday muggings. It was a time of profound disillusion.

By adopting a conservative, populist narrative, Bolsonaro offered simple solutions to complex problems in the midst of political and economic collapse. For example, his campaign symbol was firearms, which – he promised – would be legalized to solve the problem of urban violence by enabling citizens to defend themselves and their properties. Moreover, he was an



entertainment phenomenon and the politician most featured in popular TV shows. Like Donald Trump, he embodied a type of caricature, a grotesque and funny character (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016) who, in front of the cameras, easily insulted people and pointed his finger at an internal enemy: the *vagabundo*. This term is an empty signifier and a powerful historical and cultural concept - that derives from the notions of *marginal* (criminal, bandit) and *vadio* (Idler) - creating the sense of otherness in Brazil. A *vagabundo* refers to a person who does not work hard, but also a cheater, a criminal. This label has also been employed to frame activists, feminists, LGBTQI+ people, and so forth. Amidst a crisis, Bolsonaro blamed *vagabundos* for the social turmoil and mobilized the long-standing fear and the profound desire to act in self-defense against them (see Pierucci 1984).

### **Pre-electoral phase: existential anxiety**

In 2016, vast youth mobilizations unfolded in Brazil. Students from all over the country occupied around 1,200 public high schools, including Porto Alegre. Due to of this insurgence, we decided to return to the field site to check whether our former interlocutors who had engaged in the *rolezinhos* in the malls – the children of the Brazil’s new consumers – had joined the occupations. We went to a local school and, to our surprise, the young men we knew not only despised the occupiers as *vagabundos*, but also demonstrated profound admiration for Bolsonaro. They were fascinated by the politician and found him to be funny, straightforward, and authentic. They were self-declared *bolsominions*. For them, the politician was an icon - a myth, as he is called by his followers. At that time, Bolsonaro was a niche phenomenon and he was only known by people from institutions with internet access, like schools and army quarters.

On the other hand, a whole new generation of low-income young females declared themselves to be feminists and anti-Bolsonaro. The reasons for this are two-fold. They are the granddaughters of women who engaged in participatory budgeting meetings in the 1990s and daughters of women who were financially empowered in the Lula era. On top of that, they were influenced by an extraordinary new wave of feminism, LGBTQI+, and antiracist social movements. For example, 2015 was marked by the so-called “feminist spring” with protests both online and offline.

When we noticed the male conservative turn, our intention was to interview only the *bolsominions* because they intrigued us. Yet, the young feminists demanded to be interviewed: “I also want to discuss politics!” – said Luisa, 17 years-old. In response, we organized mixed

focus groups in which the girls talked about why they found Bolsonaro to be misogynist. The men, on the other hand, were completely intimidated by the debates and kept quiet, witnessing the girls who went to the meeting prepared with written arguments and data against Bolsonaro. Bianca, a 17-year-old feminist who was in conflict with her *bolsonarista* father, asked Johnny, 20, who had served in the army: “Johnny, do you find it morally correct to call a woman a slut?”. She was referring to a well-known episode of Brazilian politics in which Bolsonaro insulted Maria do Rosário, a congresswoman, using this very term. Johnny, with his head down, humbly said “no”.

In the groups composed solely of *bolsonaristas*, the boys felt encouraged to express their ideas by stressing that they wanted to have a gun. Johnny once told me that he would no longer participate in the mixed focus groups because the girls spoke too loudly, and he felt “oppressed” by them. On these occasions, it became evident that *Bolsonarism*, among the male youngsters, was a backlash against a feeling of loss of protagonism, control, and the destabilization of the hegemonic hyper-masculine pattern that was perpetuated in Brazilian favelas (Soares 2004), where a warrior and breadwinner ethos prevailed (Zaluar 2010). Those young men were socialized to perform a single social role but were becoming adults in a world undergoing deep transformations concerning gender roles in low-income communities.

Men becoming quiet and defensive was common during the fieldwork. For example, in May 2018, Maria, 42, a confectioner, provided us with an eloquent interview in which she articulated the reasons why she disliked Bolsonaro. As she spoke, her husband remained quiet, with a disapproving facial expression and saying he would not speak to us because he didn’t like politics. As soon as we had left their house, Maria called to tell us that he was “mad at her” because she had spoken “too much” and had acted arrogantly. A little after the conversation, he reacted by posting a viral text on his Facebook page titled “40 reasons to vote for Bolsonaro” that included a mix of anti-mediatic establishment stances, punitive, homophobic, anti-leftist remarks, and conservative statements, such as “he is against Marxist indoctrination in schools”, “he is against abortion”, etc.

Current scholarly debates on the global conservative shift have analyzed the impact of “hardship/austerity” or “bias/racism” on voters’ support for authoritarianism (see Fetzer 2018; Smith and Hanley, 2018; Womick, Rothmund, Azevedo, King, and Jost 2019). From our ethnographic perspective, the opposition between “economy” and “identity” faded away. Although hatred against minorities play a central role in the rise of *Bolsonarism*, the rise of conservatism in Brazil is not merely a backlash. The recession was a trigger that unleashed a masculinity crisis, uncertainty, reinforced long-standing prejudices, and the structure of

everyday life amidst poverty and patriarchy. Thus, the economic and masculinity crises mutually fed each other. The hegemonic pattern structured upon patriarchy was doubly affected by emerging female voices in addition to unemployment and a fear of the future.

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As Kimmel (2017, p. ix) pointed out in his work among impoverished white men in the United States, our interlocutors had the feeling they were losing something: properties, honor, integrity, dignity. By not “getting what they felt they deserved” they experienced a “sense of losing themselves as a man (...) their sense of being ‘somebody’”. This masculinity crisis was constructed within a wide context suggestive of anger, vulnerability, and frustration with the issues of unemployment, impoverishment, and public security. In Morro, we would hear people complain that life had become harder, but, at the time, they couldn’t identify the relevant cause, but nonetheless demanded radical change. As Anriel (22, Uber driver) said: “I do not know what happened in the last few years, but life became more and more difficult, more violent, and money is no longer enough for daily expenses, for leisure, the weekend barbecue. Something must change, it is impossible to continue in this way.”

As Teresa Caldeira (2000) argues in her landmark study of urban violence in Brazil, the talk of crime symbolically reorders the world and elaborates on social discriminations. The talk of the crime – she argues – is contagious and produces practical political effects. In all narrated cases of violence, crime was a turning point in support for Bolsonaro. When Milton explained his vote for the candidate, he always returned to his house saga, retelling the same story of the ‘beautiful armed bandit’ who took his house. In the same vein, Cassio (19) described a mugging in which he had a gun pointed at his head, begged for his life, and gave his cell phone to the thief. He passively gave away the only good thing that he had acquired with his salary as a supermarket cashier. In addition to the material loss, Cassio felt vulnerable and humiliated.

A fascination with guns is at the core of *Bolsonarism*. As several scholars have predicted (Fonseca 2000; Soares 2004; Zaluar 2010), this object plays a fundamental role in the making of masculinity in low-income communities. In Morro, a gun confers power and distinction; it is a commodity through which men become *gente*: respected, visible, feared. Unlike women, who feared the death of their close relatives, men admired Bolsonaro since he promised to legalize firearms. Most of our male interlocutors saw guns as a means for self-defense and to protect their goods and lives in everyday muggings. In addition, they often cited

the need to protect their family's morality and honor. Ultimately, the promise of a gun was the ability to secure patriarchal control over life.

The lure of firearms in the development of male personhood in Brazil can be observed in the career paths of low-income men. In Morro, as in many Brazilian favelas, a large subset of male teenagers joined the drug trafficking trade. Their counterparts presented a contrasting yet related identity behavior, for example, joining the army or police force, which is only an option for a few of these young adults. For those who escaped a life of crime but were not offered a position in the army or police, working as a security guard was a third alternative to reverting back to the invisibility of the poor, to gain respect, to assume the role of protector, to have a place in a hierarchical structure, to symbolize order, to wear a uniform, and finally, to carry and display a gun—which represented supreme power over life and death.

Bolsonaro's narrative targeted this moral universe in a meaningful way, and his military record restored a sense of male authority that guaranteed order in a land perceived to be ungoverned. Cassio described his vote in these personalistic terms: "the country is lost; people do not know what is right and wrong. I believe Bolsonaro, like drug trafficking, will restore the order and what is right and wrong. Morro became a lawless area".

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When explaining Bolsonaro's support, our interlocutors, who were mostly men (but also some women), articulated a narrative that combined class anxiety, meritocracy, and punitivism. Even living in a low-income community, in an unsafe house, having been unemployed for a long time, these men did not consider themselves to be working class. Their narratives often included despised poor neighbors, in an attempt to differentiate themselves from their "polluted" surroundings. Some of them constantly picked on their other neighbor using the term *chinelão* (a local deprecating term to describe someone poor), while classifying themselves, in contrast, as an individual who possessed *nível* (a Brazilian term to describe someone with cultural capital), a member of the middle class. They did not identify themselves with the lower strata immediately surrounding them, but, rather, with the white-middle class entrepreneurial discourse. The possibility of being a *ninguém* (nobody) terrified them.

Although Milton's wife received a Bolsa Família – and this financial support was essential for building the couple's first house – Milton believed that the benefit left the poor lazy, accustomed to not working. Fernando, 40, was extremely sad after having lost his job with an airline company. He applied for a university course through an affirmative action

program for the poor, but failed to get a place. He opened a non-lucrative lan-house in Morro and endorsed an entrepreneurial neoliberal narrative:

*My friend is richer than me, but black, and accessed university by the quota, I didn't receive it. I think smart people do not need quotas. The best wins. Bolsonaro will reduce taxes. He will work for a small government. And he will help anyone who really wants to work. Bolsonaro promised to loosen labor laws in order to help the bosses (patrão) like me.*

Anriel, who was a former *rolezeiro*, was now a father and had started working as an Uber driver. He considered himself to be a Bolsonaro fan and had put a Bolsonaro sticker on his car, (which had often made him lose clients). When asked why he liked this politician in particular, he reflected on his life and confided that most of his friends were killed by either the police or drug traffickers.

*I struggled to be honest, to work, I chose another path, I chose to survive, I want to have a family, to have a salary, a house, a normal life. The poor and the blacks receive social benefits, others join the drug trafficking, but what about people like me? I feel I am punished for trying to work honestly. (...) Bolsonaro is for what's correct, not for the corrupt, the vagabundos. Bolsonaro will value the hard worker.*

From Anriel's narrative, "the divide [...] between honest, hardworking family folks and *malandros* or *bandidos*" (Perlman 2010, p. 314) was at stake. This binary classification for the making of personhood in favelas was accentuated during the economic crisis. Low-income men do not have many career options in life. Those who resist the drug trafficking trade then have to exert great effort to find a job. As soon as they become a father, in their 20s, they start to become more conservative due to being abruptly compelled to be a breadwinning adult. Like Milton, who had two jobs, along this journey they develop a strong narrative of being honest, hard-working people, reflecting the values of both meritocracy and punitivism. These two categories are connected because a whole category of workers, who are poor but not extremely poor, started interpreting that the PT made little difference for people like them, but greatly benefited minorities, such as homosexuals, women, blacks, or even "vagabundos" and "bandits".

Some interlocutors believed that life was unjust for those who wanted to work honestly, in contrast with the impunity afforded *vagabundos*. “I drove 15 hours and a *vagabundo* came and ripped off everything I have. What happened with him? Nothing. Who cares? Nobody” – said Anriel, who had his car stolen and also said that he had his cell phone stolen twice by the same thief.

Against *vagabundos*, Bolsonaro endorsed a radical punitive narrative, by mandating that the law must be enforced, the criminal code made stronger, and that cops were given greater liberty to kill. During our fieldwork, when we tried to discuss the negative impacts of punitivism, such as mass incarceration, our interlocutors always retorted with powerful, individual stories that “proved” that “bandits” were better off than they were. Maurinho, 23, a former *rolezeiro*, today a *Bolsominion*, showed us a video of his brother playing football and watching Netflix in jail. He strongly believed that the state treated his brother better than it treated him. This perception is molded from a context of violent images circulating widely via both social networks like WhatsApp—through which people share images of death, violence, and drug trafficking-related executions – and popular tabloids or TV shows, which denounce urban violence and impunity.

In summary, these male workers built their identities as masculine breadwinners in opposition to those whose life was supposedly easy: *vagabundos* who receive social benefits, or unpunished bandits who, according to them, get things without working for them. Thus, they perceive themselves as victims in a world in which low-income workers are “punished” while *vagabundos* enjoy the good life. Their personal efforts to build an “honest career” were not recognized. This narrative is necessarily structured upon frustration and resentment, as well as a profound feeling of individual injustice that pitted the law-abiding worker against the *vagabundo*.

### **Electoral phase: Reconciling personhood**

On April 7, 2018, Lula was arrested for corruption, but maintained his candidacy until being replaced, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, by Fernando Haddad. The new PT candidate for the presidency was unknown to a large part of the Brazilian population. Five days prior, on September 6<sup>th</sup>, Bolsonaro was stabbed in the stomach. The first round of the election was held on October 7<sup>th</sup>.

In the last months of the campaign, accusatory fake news reports grew exponentially via WhatsApp. These originated from both sides of the campaign, but mostly Bolsonaro’s.

Knowledge of the candidate grew, while his counterpoint remained mostly unheard-of. When we asked people why they were voting for Bolsonaro, we received answers such as: “Is there anybody else in the race?”. PT’s supporters, even though they represented around 50% of the votes in the community, were timid and quiet.

In the Morro, at this point in the election, corruption became a crucial motivating reason to vote for Bolsonaro. Before the electoral process, when there was a general lack of trust in the PT specifically, and in politics in general, many people still considered voting for Lula. These sentiments were reflected in lines such as: “Well, he was corrupt, but he got things done”, “He gave to the people what is the people’s”, “He was corrupt like every single politician, but our life was better.” The electoral phase was marked by fake news and misinformation. During the electoral phase, many people now despised Lula’s party: the anti-PT sentiment, pervasive among the middle and upper class, had finally reached the poor. Many of those that we contacted believed that the economic crisis was caused by the corruption of the PT, but contradicted themselves when they said that their lives were better in the PT era. Some people, like Muriel (19, student), said there was no economic growth during the PT era, just “a boom of commodities”. Following his logic, when we asked if the economic recession had also been caused by the commodity boom, he straight-forwardly answered: “no! PT looted the country.” Milton, for his part, believed that the “PT had a plan to transform Brazil into Venezuela”.

A month before the first round of the election, our fieldwork intensified in the wake of these unprecedented anti-PT sentiments and hyperpolarized dynamics. For a long time, people remained shy and were ashamed to talk about Bolsonaro (especially because many people still considered voting for Lula), but when the official campaign started in mid-August 2018 this changed completely. People actually approached us with requests to be interviewed. A waiter at a local pizzeria interrupted our dinner and asked: “Are you the researchers who want to talk to Bolsonaro voters? I want to give an interview!”.

It was an emotionally charged and highly contagious movement that we observed emerge in Morro — an area of the city that the PT had abandoned – like never before. Days before the election, it became harder to identify reasons why people voted for Bolsonaro. After a five-year limbo, marked by a multidimensional crisis, a diversity of frustrations motivated support for Bolsonaro: corruption, unemployment, order, family, safety, taking the PT out of power, etc. After the stabbing, many people mentioned that if someone tried to kill him, it was because “he was good” or “the powerful are afraid of him.”

By the very end of this election, voting for Bolsonaro had become a matter of belonging. Anriel related that it was the first time he saw people campaigning for faith, love, and not in

exchange for money or fear of losing the Bolsa Família social benefit. Some even called an anti-establishment vote “revolutionary”, “protest”, and “subversive”. Our interlocutors said that they were voting for the far-right candidate because change – any change – was needed. “We need to change the state of affairs” – so people said. Peer-to-peer, the flood of pre-programmed fake news and bots, grassroots online engagement was crucial to creating an organic movement in which people felt included. “I feel I am a part of something wider, a movement of transforming my country”—said Cassio. Many younger voters we contacted in a local secondary school, mentioned that it was the first time that they loved politics and felt truly included in the campaign. Passionate voters mentioned in WhatsApp groups that Bolsonaro used to show up to say “hi,” and people recounted stories of their personal relationships with him, “he knows who I am” - said Barbara, a fan who tattooed his name.

## CONCLUSION

Hope and hate are not totalizing categories, but labels that depict two different moments that marked our ethnography. There was ‘hate’ in ‘hope’ and ‘hope’ in ‘hate’. The ‘Brazilian dream’ brought about contradicting political ambiguities as it fostered citizenship via consumption while public goods remained precarious. The national momentum impacted the poor in terms of self-worth. Manufactured goods mediated a process through which the interlocutors included in this study found that they gained respect and visibility. Buying things became a key element in low-income people’s empowerment and recognition.

As a result of the recession and increased urban violence, our interlocutors were no longer able to possess goods – a structuring element of their self-constitution and personhood. In other words, if consumerism became an existential issue, its absence—amidst a multidimensional crisis and indebtedness—unleashed a crisis of self-worth. In this specific context, very few communal or participatory resources remained: public goods deteriorated and people experienced the crisis detached from the collective, since there were no community meetings, forums, or social events at which people could discuss and elaborate their everyday problems. While the participatory budgeting meetings championed the collective decision-making process, *Bolsonarism* represented the opposite: a single male figure that would act as a national savior. This candidate represented both the great promise of restoring social order and an opportunity to reconcile the crisis of personhood prevalent among men during the peak of the national crisis.



Finally, in this paper, as we focused on Bolsonaro voters, we did not expand the perception of women. Although we encountered many female voters who admired the candidate, most women rejected him—and their votes varied according to race and generation. We observed a tendency for older black women to stand by the PT—acknowledging that their lives were radically transformed during the Lula era. Many young women didn't vote for anyone at all because they considered all of the candidates to be part of the same corrupt political system. In the end, the sense of self-worth was gendered. This does not mean that this existential crisis didn't impact women; it merely means male and female voters had different lenses through which they experienced and interpreted national chaos. Women, in the end, felt their lives had improved in the last years. In our field site, a large part of Bolsonaro's voter base were men who experienced being robbed, not only of their possessions in everyday muggings, but also of their role as primary breadwinners, their purchasing power, their political voices in families, and in sum, their patriarchal control over life.

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