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The Elective Affinities Between Jair Bolsonaro's Ideological Wing and Edir Macedo's Theology: The Case of COVID-19

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Max Weber—*In Memoriam*

In the same year as the 100-year anniversary of Max Weber's death, which was caused by complications due to contamination with the Spanish Flu, the COVID-19 virus becomes a pandemic, generating a world crisis without any foreseeable end. In order to remember the anniversary of the German sociologist's death and seize the opportunity to write about COVID-19 as a current topic, I will use the concept of elective affinities (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) to explain the ideological affinities between the ideological wing of the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, and the theology of Edir Macedo, the leader of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), a Neo-Pentecostal church from Brazil.

As previously observed (McKinnon 2010, Löwy 2011), Weber's concept of elective affinities does not concern a relation of cause and effect, but rather an attraction of ideas and/or practices. He used the concept, which he borrowed from Goethe, to indicate how the inner-worldly asceticism from a few Protestant strands could merge with an incipient Modern capitalism, in a specific historical context. The term elective affinities was used a few times by the German author in the book *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, especially in the more rigorous translations into English (Weber 2002), since a few authors, such as Talcott Parsons, have used the terms "certain correlations" and "those relationships" to translate *Wahlverwandtschaft*, which nowadays are not considered correct by scholars (Löwy 2011, 132).

Moreover, I will analyze Bolsonaro's ideological wing and Edir Macedo's Neo-Pentecostal theology in terms not of cause and effect, but of convergence in relation to their interpretation about COVID-19 and, in a broader sense, to their support for Bolsonaro's government. While the ideological wing treats the virus as a Sino-communist conspiracy to conquer the world, the UCKG's theology believes in demonic ubiquity with the aim of causing panic. However, both agree that the Brazilian media have created the hysteria, mostly because it attacks Bolsonaro's incompetent handling of the virus. Thus, both the ideological wing and the Neo-Pentecostal leader believe that there are economic and political agendas behind these attacks.

COVID-19 According to Bolsonaro's Ideological Wing: Olavo de Carvalho and the Communist Conspiracy

On March 10, 2020, Jair Bolsonaro said, while on a trip to Miami, that COVID-19 "was not all that the big media propagates throughout the world," in a clear demonstration of his discredit of the media and of the virus, despite the fact that the World Health Organization had declared a worldwide pandemic. Over the next few days, Bolsonaro underwent exams, since his chief communications secretary, Fabio Wajngarten, tested positive for COVID-19. On March 15, supporters of the Brazilian president scheduled a protest against political institutions, more specifically the National Congress—the Chamber of Deputies and Senate—and the Supreme Federal Court. Bolsonaro's engagement with the protest was substantial, which included direct greetings and physical contacts with protesters in Brasilia, the federal capital. In his appearance, Bolsonaro not only contradicted himself, since a week

earlier he had said that he had not taken any part in the call for protests, but he also contradicted his own Health Minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, who had asked Brazilian citizens to avoid crowds. On March 17, with Brazil already facing extreme cases and several deaths due to COVID-19, Bolsonaro re-affirmed that the virus outbreak was only “a sort of hysteria.” On March 20, he called COVID-19 a “little flu,” still minimizing its destructive effects.¹ On April 16, Bolsonaro fired Mandetta, after more than a month of political struggle; his Health Minister advocated for social isolation against the coronavirus, while Bolsonaro wanted the re-opening of several services to save the economy.

Since the beginning of his administration, Bolsonaro has followed the ideological guidelines of Olavo de Carvalho, a self-proclaimed philosopher who does not have a single official diploma. Notwithstanding the lack of academic capital, Carvalho has touted followers over the past few years, especially with his online classes on philosophy, during the time of the decline of the Workers’ Party (PT), which was at the head of the Brazilian Executive Branch for thirteen years during the presidencies of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff. In spite of his bibliography in philosophy—which is controversial and ignored in formal institutions of higher education due to its lack of academic rigor –, he became an important figure in the impeachment process of Rousseff, in which protesters against the PT’s government often went to the streets with the saying “Olavo is right” on handmade posters.

Olavo’s success strategy, which consequently allowed him to become the ideological guru of the president, was something *sui generis*; he imported a good amount of conspiracy theories from the U.S., mostly from Alex Jones, the infamous American journalist who has received kind comments from Donald Trump. The conspiracies imported by de Carvalho went from aborted fetuses used to flavor Pepsi colas to doubting the nationality of former president Barack Obama. However, the Brazilian self-styled guru does not limit himself to American conspiracy theories; he once said that the former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso only got elected because he had entered the Freemasons (de Carvalho 2015, 304), and that Prince Charles, the heir of the British crown, was a member of a Tariqa that aimed to implement Islam worldwide.

Unlike Jones, de Carvalho was able to refine his conspiracy theories with his knowledge of philosophy and self-proclaimed fame of a good debater. However, the leitmotiv in de Carvalho’s thinking is a kind of McCarthyism adapted to the Brazilian context, in which not only people from the Left are communists, but also liberals and almost any kind of dissenting ideological branch. He interprets the world through a “cultural warfare” in which Antonio Gramsci and The Frankfurt School removed Marxism from a mere preoccupation with economic infrastructure; the war is happening now in the ideological field, and he therefore baptizes most of the ideological branches that differ from his conservatism as “cultural Marxism” (de Carvalho 2002). The Brazilian media is an example of a den full of communists who wish to spread what he calls “gender ideology” (which is related to gender studies) and “gayzism”; the latter would be the attempt to create a homosexual identity and, through education, teach it to children, who would then internalize this behavior seen as repulsive by Bolsonaro’s guru. Hence, the communist plot would have its basis in the

¹ <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/governo/gripezinha-e-histeria-cinco-vezes-em-que-bolsonaro-minimizou-o-coronavirus/>. Accessed on 17/04/2020.

dismantling of the Christian/Catholic family and, through ideological aspects, the imposing of a revolution against the traditionalism preached by Olavo.

It is no wonder that, when Bolsonaro took over the government, he had problems with China, since Olavo de Carvalho believes the country is engaged in a plot to install communism throughout the world. However, the communism is not restricted to China; universities all over the world, parts of the Catholic Church, and even billionaires such as the Rockefeller Family and George Soros are all responsible for the attempt to install Karl Marx's political system. With a premise that communism is everywhere, de Carvalho is perhaps the most important negationist of mainstream science in Brazil, although he lives in the U.S. The ideologue has already asserted that cigarettes do not cause harm and are good against Alzheimer's disease, he has defended geocentrism (de Carvalho 2015, 186), and more recently, he has seen good points in the Flat Earth "theory."² The situation becomes more aggravated when COVID-19 comes into play. Just after the substantial dissemination of the virus, de Carvalho shared a conspiracy video on his social media; according to the author of the video, the billionaire Bill Gates patented COVID-19, spreading it throughout the world in order to contain worldwide population numbers.

Despite the exacerbated conspiracy tone, de Carvalho's power is notable inside the Brazilian government. Bolsonaro himself said he followed his guru's recommendation in the nomination of Ricardo Velez as Minister of Education, just after he took over the presidency. Concerning COVID-19, Olavo seems to have dictated, at least in the early moments of the crisis in Brazil, Bolsonaro's tone with regard to the pandemic. The attacks against the "media hysteria" have seemed more important than containing the virus, at least in the discourses aimed at their common followers. Additionally, although Bolsonaro and de Carvalho are conservative Catholics, their discourses against TV Globo, the biggest television broadcaster in Brazil, have impacted another group that has grown exponentially in the country over the past few decades, the Pentecostals, whose most famous leader is Edir Macedo.

Edir Macedo, COVID-19, and Demonic Omnipresence

Edir Macedo, the UCKG's leader and founder, also published a video about COVID-19 on March 15. In the first part of the video, Macedo said that there were no big problems with the virus. He accused the media of propagating terror to all nations with regard to COVID-19, and said that there were economic interests behind the generalized fear, without specifying what these interests would be. In the second part of the video, Macedo shows the analysis of a doctor—Dr. Beny Schmidt, from the Federal University of São Paulo—who, among other assertions, affirms that the virus "does not cause even flu-like symptoms" and that "it does not harm anyone." In the third and final part, Macedo returns to say that Satan works through doubt and fear, and that the religious leader sees no reason for his followers

² In: <https://ultimosegundo.ig.com.br/politica/2019-05-30/internet-nao-perdoa-flerte-de-olavo-de-carvalho-com-terraplanismo-veja-memes.html>. Accessed on 17/04/2020.

to be worried.³ The church's official discourse changed over the next few days, as other church leaders said that Macedo only wanted to avoid panic. However, attacks continued against the media that had distorted Macedo's message, according to the church's website. Nonetheless, on March 18, the UCKG published a video calling its members to attend religious services at the Temple of Solomon—the most important church building, located in São Paulo—with a headline that considered COVID-19 as a sign that the biblical Apocalypse was near.⁴ The severity of the situation seemed to be better understood, taking into consideration that the church also published guidelines for preventing the virus, such as decreasing the number of people at religious encounters by opening the temple all day long, and changing regular practices like the placing of hands on members' heads during prayers. The UCKG has, in the political sphere, its own strategy to gain power (Macedo and Oliveira 2008), as evident by its extra-official political party, the Republicanos. Following a similar line as the ideological wing of de Carvalho, Macedo's own plans converged to support the candidature and government of Jair Bolsonaro.

It is worth recalling that Macedo has supported every single elected president in Brazil after the military dictatorship. In spite of the ideological plurality of the presidents, Macedo has always been able to adapt himself to the political establishment with respect to the Brazilian Executive Branch. However, there have been disagreements; the most important example occurred during the Workers' Party government in the controversy surrounding the sex education handbook for children made by the Minister of Education at the time, Fernando Haddad, who would lose the presidential elections to Bolsonaro in 2018. The attacks against “gender ideology,” or more broadly, against gender-related themes (e.g. feminism and LGBTQ movements, especially) by the more conservative sectors of Brazilian society are also a banner for Macedo.

In 2016, the UCKG was able to elect the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Marcello Crivella, who is also a church bishop—the highest position in the UCKG hierarchy. Crivella has a very unpopular government, and he has recently begun to praise Bolsonaro more vehemently in public, probably to earn support in this year's elections, when the mayor will try to re-elect himself. Bolsonaro's popularity is extremely high among Brazilian evangelicals—which include UCKG members and Pentecostals in general—mostly because of the close alignment of religious leaders with his government, especially in relation to moral values. The Minister of Women and Human Rights, Damares Alves, is an evangelical pastor, for example. Another point of mutual benefit between the current government and Macedo is with regard to publicity money. Macedo is the owner of TV Record, which already in Bolsonaro's first year as president has surpassed TV Globo in relation to the amount of money received from the federal government for propaganda.⁵ TV Globo is an ideological enemy of Bolsonaro in terms of moral values and an economic enemy of Macedo. The alignment against a common enemy is, therefore, a strategic move on the part of both leaders.

³ In: <https://www.poder360.com.br/midia/edir-macedo-diz-que-coronavirus-e-inofensivo-e-tatica-de-satanas/>. Accessed on 17/04/2020.

⁴ In: <https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/o-coronavirus-e-o-fim-dos-tempos/>. Accessed on 17/04/2020.

⁵ In: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/04/gasto-do-governo-federal-com-publicidade-cresce-e-record-supera-globo.shtml>. Accessed on 17/04/2020.

Notwithstanding the huge adaptability of Macedo with regard to politics, the demonization of adversaries has always been present in his *modus operandi*. Obviously, this does not concern just politics; Macedo demonizes other religions (Afro-Brazilian traditions, Spiritism, the Catholic Church, etc.) and even other Pentecostal churches. The Brazilian sociologist Ricardo Mariano, who has researched Brazilian Pentecostalism for decades, understands the exacerbated demonization in UCKG services as a characteristic of the “devil as a protagonist” (Mariano 2003). This characteristic could be extended to outside the services as well; the devil is a protagonist in almost every church discourse, since even the media broadcasting about COVID-19 has become the work of the devil.

In Bolsonaro’s live broadcast via Facebook on March 17 with a few supporters, one of the participants asked everyone, in the form of a prayer, to “prophesy” the end of the virus in Brazil—something promptly done by Bolsonaro. The act of prophesying, very common in Brazilian Pentecostal churches, indicates the alignment of the president with the quasi-Manichean Pentecostal worldview that understands the spiritual world as a battle between good and evil. Bolsonaro also called for a fast against COVID-19 on April 5, which was followed by prominent Pentecostal leaders such as R.R. Soares, Silas Malafaia, Marco Feliciano, and of course, Edir Macedo. In the political sphere, the president’s son, the Federal Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, accused China of spreading COVID-19 around the world, which was in tune with Olavo de Carvalho’s interpretations and worldviews. Not so coincidentally, Eduardo is a follower of de Carvalho. Thus, in Brazilian politics today, there is Manichaeism in politics—the communist “other”—and Manichaeism in the spiritual realm—the Satanist “other”—, which thereby reflects two of the most important ideological foundations of the government.

Conclusion: The Elective Affinities in Bolsonaro’s Government

The negation of the severity of COVID-19 is part of an agenda of discrediting the regular media by both the ideological wing of Bolsonaro’s government and the theological (or political and economic) interests of Macedo and company. While the former’s aim is more aligned with the ascension of conservative values and the retraction of the communist threat (whether real or not), the latter benefits from political and economic deals with the government, while sharing similar conservative values as well. It is easy to observe the alignment between the two branches, which thus demonstrates their elective affinities in the form of a revulsion against the media and science, as evident in the government of Jair Bolsonaro. This process has much to do with the huge growth, over the past few decades, of Pentecostals in Brazil who have a Manichean interpretation of the world in which good and evil are at war in all possible spheres.

The polarization of Brazilian society, which is similar to what has happened in the U.S., has put Macedo’s theology and de Carvalho’s ideology on the same side. The elective affinities between the two are apparent as they, in Goethe’s words, “seek one another out, attract, seize, destroy, devour, consume one another, and then emerge again from this most intimate union in renewed, novel and unexpected shape” (Goethe 2005, 66). The struggle between the two had previously occurred in the religious sphere—when de Carvalho recently said that all bad things come from Evangelical churches for example— but their mutual

attraction has materialized into a full support for the government.⁶ Could one say, recalling Weber once again, that in Brazil there is an elective affinity between the Pentecostal ethic and the “spirit” of Bolsonarism? One would think so, but if all that is solid melts into air, the *tendency* is that the “spirit” will soon be gone; the ethic, on the other hand, has undoubtedly come to stay.

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⁶ In: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/monicabergamo/2020/03/olavo-de-carvalho-diz-que-igrejas-evangelicas-sao-responsaveis-por-tudo-o-que-acontece-de-mau-no-brasil.shtml>. Accessed on 17/04/2020.