

From freedom to economic submission: A Laclauian reading of Bolsonaro in the 2022 elections

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Abstract

The rise of the far-right in the world has shown a discursive logic in which, while affirming the crisis of liberal democracies, it positions itself as a response to this failure. Thus, it is expected that these leaders will defend alternative logics to liberalism/neoliberalism. However, as can be seen in Bolsonaro's electoral propaganda in 2022, the connection between the far-right and neoliberalism reduces freedom itself to the dictates of economic liberty, economicising all aspects of social and political life – like Wendy Brown analyses the neoliberalism in *Citizen Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics*. This work presents a discursive analysis of Bolsonaro's campaign in the 2022 election, specifically focusing on "economic liberty" and the encompassed signifiers (reduction of the State, individual freedom, and national development – as well as their idiosyncrasies) that counterpose his antagonist – the Workers' Party.

Keywords: Freedom; Economy; Neoliberalism; Bolsonaro; 2022 Electoral Campaign; Discourse Analysis

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a stark rise of far-right politicians and governments. The rise of these extremes on the ideological spectrum presents an almost uniform discourse, in which conservative agendas are the keynote of their representatives' speeches. But what are these agendas? The question arises because pragmatism is a strong characteristic of conservatism. In this way, conservative demands can vary depending on the situation.

Jair Bolsonaro's government in Brazil, in economic terms, has sought to develop a neoliberal policy. It's interesting that Bolsonaro's conservatism has adapted to the economy. As a federal deputy, he kept the defence of statism on the horizon. As a candidate for the presidency of Brazil in 2018, he maintained his *conservatism in customs* but surprisingly embraced liberalism in the economy. With this in mind, and considering his quest for re-election in 2022, this discussion raises the following question: How did the discursive construction of economic freedom take place in Jair Bolsonaro's discourse in the 2022 elections, using Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's Discourse Theory as a theoretical-methodological basis and relying on Wendy's Brown conception of neoliberalism?

This closer look allows us to extrapolate the issue beyond this centrality and conjecture the consequences of such a perspective for the construction of the candidate himself as a political subject. This is where we seek to identify the interrelationships between the candidate's discourse and the neoliberal agendas that have demarcated the discourse of the extreme right in the world, at least in the field of politics. Thus, in addition to scrutinising Bolsonaro's discourse in the 2022 elections, it is necessary to identify where, how and to what extent 'economic freedom' was inserted into the discursive construction of the then presidential candidate.

Discussion

For this discussion, we selected two relevant signifiers from Bolsonaro's campaign - economy and freedom - given our interest in seeing how neoliberalism appears in his 2022 electoral discourse. Based on an in-depth analysis, a major discourse emerged called Economic Freedom, which articulates three major demands: Decrease the State, which combines ideas such as Defending public-private partnership, Defending the free market, Reducing bureaucracy, Privatisation and Reducing taxes; Individual Freedom, which includes Freedom of the press, Freedom of expression and Individual economic freedom; and National Development, which includes Investments in infrastructure, Defending agribusiness, Regional development and Investments in national industry. In turn, the

Economic Freedom node is the nodal point, the result of the articulation chain, which gives representation to all these demands.

A political discourse is always an opposition discourse, a discourse that pretends to be hegemonic in a context of constant dispute for hegemony. In the case of Bolsonaro, the discourse is built around the slogan 'God, homeland, family and freedom'. Although these four signifiers claim to be central in their articulations, a discourse, especially that of a political candidate, involves various other themes. In the case of this article, as already mentioned, two signifiers were mobilised to read the analysis material: freedom and the economy. The transformation of these two signifiers into one, economic freedom, occurred because, at the end of the day, there is little that can be said about freedom that is not linked to economic freedom in the Bolsonaro discourse of the 2022 campaign.

During his administration, Bolsonaro has sought to deepen the agenda of the previous government, with an institutional framework that prevents the alternation of power from allowing a new ruler to use instruments other than those of a neoliberal logic. Although defences such as freedom of expression and freedom of the press appeared in the candidate's campaign, they were always focused on issues that were directly associated with individual freedom, which is subject to economic freedom.

It is also relevant to address the antagonism that constructs the very identity of Bolsonaro's candidate in 2022. The discourse in opposition to the Workers' Party (PT) and communism runs through the entire discursive construction of the candidate. For this reason, the antagonistic will be presented alongside the elements that together make up Bolsonaro's discursive construction of Economic Freedom. I will present now the details of the three major demands, starting with Decrease the State.

As the expression itself makes clear, the element Decrease the State establishes the defence of reducing the state apparatus. Even in 2018, Bolsonaro's electoral base was already demanding this position, which has guided his government. According to Rocha & Solano (2021), the former president's definition of the bad characteristics of the state led to a solution by replacing it with private enterprise. In Bolsonaro's view, the Brazilian state needs to be slimmed down. He made this clear at the launch of his candidacy, when he declared: 'Our mission is not to get in the way of your lives! It's to get the state off your backs more and more. Strong state, weak people, strong people, weak state'.

The idea of this regulatory state that should be put aside exalts privatisations, de-bureaucratisations, public-private partnerships and deregulations that

boost the 'free market' and favour job creation. These perceptions are in line with Wendy Brown's analysis of neoliberalism: the neoliberal rationality of the economicisation of political and social life is characterised by a discursive production that extends market logics to all dimensions of life - this extension seeks on the one hand, to emancipate individuals from state interventions and, on the other, to involve these individuals in the neoliberalised sphere. There are several statements about these meanings in relation to the antagonistic pole: the Workers' Party, in general terms in Bolsonaro's discourse, represents bureaucracy, corruption and economic recession.

In addition, reducing taxes was the main action defended by Bolsonaro, specially related to the achievements of his government. Most of the time, the tax pronouncements are aimed at the population to construct them as people who suffer from the heavy burden of the state - a state that makes consumer items more expensive due to the high tax. Here are two reflections. The first is the question of who, for example, does cutting import taxes benefit? The second is that without taxes, the state cannot guarantee access to and maintenance of services for the people. During the Bolsonaro administration, the fiscal area has faced a strong neoliberal policy, such as the Pension Reform, seeking the proposed transition to a capitalisation system, an attempt to privatise the General Pension System. In this direction, and beyond this idea of reducing the state, the meanings related to reducing taxes are also closely linked to another fundamental element in Bolsonaro's construction, *individual freedom*.

The word freedom appeared a lot throughout Bolsonaro's election campaign. It's curious that at no point did the former president state what was his conception about what freedom is. He simply defended it, based on an antagonistic logic in which freedom was threatened by the left, then represented by the PT, and he - Bolsonaro - was the only one capable of saving it. Firstly, it's worth pointing out that freedom is an empty signifier that brings together a range of meanings that are articulated around it. It is also mobilised in relation to an antagonistic enemy, the left-wing candidate, Lula, of PT, and the left itself, which defends collective agendas.

In an analysis of the conditions of emergence and the context of the discourses constructed throughout the campaign, freedom - and especially the individual's freedom of expression - takes on conservative and reactionary contours. A reactionary is a political figure who follows the logic of what the name suggests: react. In this sense, a reactionary reacts in an individualistic way, because they don't trust anyone except their closest relations. Thus, the defence of 'unrestricted' and 'absolute' freedom to express all ideas is limited to reactionary and conservative ideas

that are exclusionary, discriminatory and/or anti-democratic. The defence of freedom of expression, therefore, remains a very narrow concept, used to prevent any form of investigation or criminalisation of speeches aligned with the president.

Although this freedom of expression from the 2022 campaign is a fundamental part of Bolsonaro's discursive construction of the defence of individual freedom, it is especially another meaning given to freedom that stands out: the individual's economic freedom. This is because a significant part of Bolsonaro's discourse, according to what we observed earlier, is closely linked to the economic aspect.

This economic freedom of the individual that emerges in Bolsonaro's discourse is linked to the concept of individualism and the move away from a regulatory state. As the state is viewed negatively by Bolsonaro, nothing could be fairer than people getting rid of it and being able to make their own choices - as in the quest to privatise the General Welfare System. Representing the idea of the individual who thrives on their own, and of a state that should be reduced, since it only impedes individual freedom.

In this way, Bolsonaro's economic discourse based on the idea of 'getting the state off our backs' is translated into exaltations of reducing the state apparatus and public spending. Returning to what was said earlier, there are many mentions of reducing taxes and cutting red tape, which are closely linked to the growth of the economy and job creation during his administration. Equally recurrent is the idea par excellence of liberalism, which is the defence of private property, seen as a kind of 'sacred right of the individual', which is also threatened by the antagonistic discursive enemy.

Thus, the discourse of individual freedom articulates freedom of expression and economic freedom in a very close relationship with neoliberalism. According to Wendy Brown, the neoliberal sphere places the entrepreneurial dimension everywhere, resulting in the drastic reduction of substantive active citizenship in favour of valuing freedom and individual responsibility - in the latter, individuals are doubly implicated: for self-care and for the economic prosperity of the whole.

In this sense, although it may initially be surprising that Bolsonaro's speeches articulate the defence of individual freedoms within an extreme right-wing proposal seen as conservative and reactionary, Wendy Brown can help explain the phenomenon once again. According to the author, in the theories of neoliberalism - notably Friedrich von Hayek - conservatism of customs and neoliberalism are, in her words, rooted in a common ontology of spontaneously evolved orders carried by tradition.

Considering this discourse, in which there would be few taxes, few or no public companies and no state investment, how would the National Development be possible, according to Bolsonaro's electoral discourse? This is the theme of the last element to be analysed here.

The elements-moments explored earlier support a typically neoliberal discourse. National Development goes along with this logic. Neoliberalism is closely related to globalisation. While the first concept is a doctrine that minimises the role of the state, preaches deregulation, market freedom and privatisation, the second refers to a process that seeks to interconnect the world in different spaces such as trade, the financial environment, politics and culture. In this sense, neoliberalism facilitates globalisation because it allows the flow of goods, services and financial investments regardless of borders, as tariffs and trade barriers are reduced. The notion of national development in Bolsonaro's discursive construction basically concerns investments in the country's infrastructure and the development of Brazilian agribusiness. It also touches on regional development and national industry.

Bolsonaro constantly emphasised in his campaign the works carried out by his government, investment in infrastructure that made economic development and job creation possible. At the same time as citing his government's achievements in infrastructure, Bolsonaro's election campaign did not stop negatively characterising the actions of left-wing governments. In this sense, Bolsonaro's discourse always combines an achievement of his own government with some idea that links the antagonist not only to the condition of failure, but also to that of being corrupt or immoral.

The defence of agribusiness has been strongly defended since the 2018 election, when Bolsonaro won its support by criticising policies that go against it, such as the environment, land reform, indigenous demarcations and arms limitations. He is given prominence especially when linked to the idea that it is agribusiness that powers Brazil's economy and feeds the world. It should be noted that small producers are not a part of this agribusiness.

Regional development was addressed by the campaign with a lot of attention to the Northeast, where Bolsonaro's electorate was the smallest in the country. Once again, the strategy applied in the campaign discourse combined the achievements of the then President with the depreciation of the actions of the PT governments. One example is the use of the conclusion of the transposition of the São Francisco River to dignify Bolsonaro's candidacy and disqualify the PT governments. For other regions, regional development was fundamentally linked to investment in infrastructure.

Regarding the defence of investment in national industry, the approach is very targeted. The campaign takes an approach based on entrepreneurship and innovation. At the same time, intentions are cited that benefit private groups in the guise of protecting the population.

In National Development, Bolsonaro's discourse that exposes the antagonistic line that separates what prevents its full constitution as an identity also appears. The PT is the main reference, accused of sending money to other countries instead of investing in Brazil. In his words:

The PT governments, Lula and Dilma, sent Brazilians' money to friendly dictators. And what's worse - they defaulted on Brazil. The PT preferred to build the metro in Venezuela rather than invest in the metro in Minas Gerais. The PT preferred to build a port in Cuba than to transpose the São Francisco and double our motorways. Lula preferred to support dictatorships rather than create jobs and develop Brazil.

These excerpts cast Bolsonaro's opponent as an adherent of corruption and a supporter of dictatorships. Both ideas have severe consequences for employment and the country's development. It is also possible to deduce, in a broad analysis, that the economic extension of the state, supported by taxes collected from the population, has allowed left-wing governments to invest abroad, neglecting domestic needs. This is the basis for Bolsonaro's defence of less state, more individual freedom and a focus on national development. Even if domestic needs are not defended as a matter for the state.

Concluding, this analysis highlights how Bolsonaro's discourse not only constructed a vision of limited state intervention and privatization as synonymous with national prosperity but also positioned opposition forces as threats to freedom itself. Ultimately, his ability to fuse neoliberal rationality with reactionary conservatism underscores Wendy Brown's assertion that neoliberalism extends market logics into all facets of life, reinforcing an individualistic, depoliticized society. This study thus contributes to the understanding of how Brazilian right-wing populism deploy economic discourse as a tool for hegemonic struggle, shaping political identities and reinforcing ideological antagonisms in contemporary democracies in exchange for a radicalisation of neoliberal reason.

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