

# Wall of mirrors: political narcissism on digital platforms

## Muralla de espejos: narcisismo político en plataformas digitales

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### ABSTRACT

We hypothesized that digital platforms, far from fostering the flourishing of a “democratic culture”, should be seen as the algorithmic materialization of imaginary, dualistic, and fragmented “wild thinking”. Through an approach that combines post-structuralism, critical theory and psychoanalysis, we sought to analyze the particular logic of political action in social media, which we metaphorically characterize as mirror walls. Our empirical research focused on a case of moral hysteria that occurred in Brazil in 2017 against the so-called “gender ideology”, when academic conferences and art exhibitions were persecuted by conservative activists. The analysis revealed a scenario of political narcissism, in which social transformation through dialogic struggles loses ground for intensification of seemingly insurmountable ideological and identity boundaries.

**Keywords:** narcissism, digital platforms, public sphere.

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**RESUMEN**

Planteamos la hipótesis de que las plataformas digitales, lejos de fomentar el florecimiento de una “cultura democrática”, deberían verse como la materialización algorítmica de un “pensamiento salvaje” imaginario, dualista y fragmentado. Basados en un enfoque que combina el postestructuralismo, la teoría crítica y el psicoanálisis, buscamos analizar la lógica particular de la acción política en las redes sociales, que caracterizamos metafóricamente como muralla de espejos. Nuestra investigación empírica se centró en un caso de histeria moral que ocurrió en Brasil en 2017 contra la llamada “ideología de género”, cuando conferencias académicas y exposiciones de arte fueron acosadas por activistas conservadores. El análisis develó un escenario de narcisismo político, en el que la transformación social a través de luchas dialógicas pierde terreno para el recrudescimiento de fronteras ideológicas e identitarias aparentemente insuperables.

**Palabras clave:** narcisismo, plataformas digitales, esfera pública.

## Introduction

In this paper, we assume that the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism can help reveal contemporary phenomena related to digital media. Thus, from a specific angle, we devote ourselves to analyzing the tendency of social practices mediated by digital platforms to structure themselves on a dualistic logic that immediately transforms difference into an inassimilable antagonistic pole: while the *other*, onto whom one projects what one rejects in oneself, is discarded as a legitimate interlocutor, an idealized self-image is constructed. We then observe how some features of the contemporary sociotechnical context are developed through the conscious exploration of these deeper traits of the human psyche, which are thus highlighted and emphasized over scientific analysis. In this way, it becomes possible to explain the current conditions both for the formulation of “public opinion” and for the development of certain forms of collective action.

To this end, we draw on Habermasian critical theory, particularly his discussion on the centrality of the public sphere, understood as a fundamental ambit in the elaboration of questions of public interest in contemporary

democracies. We also suggest that, in the contemporary world, the concept of public sphere should be reconsidered, within a new spatio-temporal framework of the network society. In the discussion, the primacy of space over time (characteristic of late modernity) has produced a particular form of subjectivity characterized by the immediacy and primacy of the affective over the reflexive, which presupposes the passage of time. This characteristic becomes the fundamental cognitive element of the architecture of social media platforms, which for economic reasons encourage instant emotional interaction in discussions of public issues. By rejecting technological determinism without denying technology's ability to reinforce pre-existing trends, we understand that digital platforms are the result of far-reaching social, cultural, economic, and political transformations that drive certain forms of narcissistic subjectification reflected in the programming and use of digital media.

The empirical example addressed is a case of moral hysteria<sup>1</sup> spread in Brazil in 2017, directed against what some political actors called "gender ideology".<sup>2</sup> This example of moral hysteria is heuristic of the forms of contemporary political action characterized by the instantaneous dissemination of messages and images that assume a simplistic framing of social reality: those who represent family values against their supposed opponents, who are understood as a threat to morality. The *other*, with

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<sup>1</sup> We prefer to use the psychoanalytic term hysteria instead of panic because we believe that the concept of hysteria, originally studied in psychoanalysis by Charcot, Janet, Freud, and Breuer, better reflects the general behavior of conservative activists, which is not really fear of the *other*, or fear and paralysis in the face of what is feared, but genuine revulsion, the projection onto the *other* of what they unconsciously reject in themselves. Although the term *hysteria* has not been used as a clinical diagnosis since the 1970s, it is still used in the literature as a synonym for a range of symptoms, including narcissism and panic. Originally, philosophers used the term, which is related to uterus in Greek, to characterize female pathologies – an association that was reversed by Freud. The neurologist noted that certain mechanisms predominate in hysteria, notably repression and the defense the subject exerts against representations that might produce unpleasant effects. Strictly speaking, the phobias that lead to emotionality, loss of control, instability, and even hypnotic behavior would only be symptoms of the hysterical structure, which for Lacan is the "structure of desire." Hysteria, then, has nothing to do with the female sexual apparatus, as was first assumed, although the attribution of one's own desire to the *other*, especially to women – a recurrent practice in the history of patriarchal societies – is a typical hysterical behavior. Women who were compulsively persecuted and killed as "witches" in the Middle Ages were the ones who were considered the cause of desire.

<sup>2</sup> "Gender ideology" is a term – shared across countries by rightwing groups – that has an evasive and reductive sense: It takes activism in favor of sexual and reproductive rights and the field of gender studies as equivalents. The term conveys the idea that the gender approach would be an unscientific and Marxist interpretation that aims to dissolve the institution of the family. For a historical and contextual understanding of the term in Latin America, see Miskolci and Campana, 2018.

whom one identifies positively or negatively, evokes immediate reactions of attraction or repulsion and is not perceived in its entirety as a *subject*.

As a research technique subordinate to the theoretical-methodological framework, we follow Deborah Lupton (2015, p. 31), who considers the Internet as a living archive to develop documentary research based, among other things, on access to textual, visual and audiovisual files, aiming to reconstruct the social processes analyzed and to follow the unfolding of phenomena as they occurred, without the need for offline<sup>3</sup> field research.

This paper is divided into two parts: the first is theoretical, linking theories of the public sphere to contributions of post-structuralism and psychoanalysis; the second is dedicated to empirical work, anchoring previous theoretical research and allowing to correlate the hypothesis of political narcissism with the case of moral hysteria detected in artistic and intellectual events in the second half of 2017 in Brazil. Finally, we present a brief conclusion that aims to highlight the limits of achieving a digitally mediated “public sphere” in the face of the exacerbation of narcissism in public debate on political issues.

## A digital public sphere?

This is an old question that goes back to the early days of the Internet. Since its emergence, analyzes have been divided between those who saw in digital networks a democratizing and participatory potential and others who, following the contributions of critical theory before Habermas, perceived them as emblematic of atomization (rather than individualization). This time, however, the question is posed differently: What kind of political culture can digital media content reveal and, on the other hand, how do these same media modulate political action in contemporary societies?

The Habermasian theory of the public sphere attaches central importance to public communication as a key element of democratic life. The public

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<sup>3</sup> In other words, the research articulated a documentary asynchronous research, focused retrospectively on specific events, combined with fluctuating ethnography, in which we followed events synchronously without actively participating as interlocutors. For a detailed discussion of forms of ethnography in digital environments, see Gomes and Leitão (2017).

sphere, as defined by Jürgen Habermas (2014), is a product of the emergence of mercantile capitalism based on the separation between the private and public spheres in the modern sense. It is constituted by private individuals in a mediating sphere between the State and society, which allows the decisions of state authorities to be subjected to rational critique. The public sphere (theoretically constituted in the classical liberal era and based on liberal law) is characterized less by a physically demarcated space than by a communicative context based on the principle of “public discussion by reasons”, emphasizing the process of opinion formation and the definition of the collective will as a space for legitimizing power.

Strictly speaking, the public sphere has never ceased to be a normative ideal that has not been empirically consummated. The Habermasian ideal presupposes the affective and intellectual independence of the individual vis-à-vis commitments either professional, state, of economic class, or of groups engaged in defending particular interests. Public debate, to which all citizens would have access, should be mediated by universal values and guided by the search for the common good (Habermas, 1985, p. 123). Public opinion would thus emerge from the free competition of opinions grounded in reason. Habermas envisioned the participant in the public sphere as a universal citizen endowed with equal rationality and capable of both recognizing others as equally legitimate interlocutors and reaching a rational consensus with them on the distinction between general and private interests.<sup>4</sup>

Habermas emphasizes in his analysis that, because of the intermingling of public and private spheres, the development of mass democracies in the twentieth century, and thus the intermingling of state and civil society, such an ideal could not be fully realized. If, according to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere had originally the press as a means of communication and was delimited in terms of class, with its expansion the space for enlightened debate gave room to the production of consensus through

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Habermas, in contrast to the French sociological tradition, which favors the terms “individual”, “subject”, and “collective”, prefers the terms “public”, “private”, “general”, and “personal”. There is not necessarily an immediate translation between the two schools. For example, the “individual” in Habermas should not be translated simply as “private” (for Habermas the individual can be universal), nor should the Durkheimian “collective” be translated as “public” (for the public/state would be closer to the particular in Habermas), just as “collective” and “general”, although similar, are constituted by different processes (the first corresponds to the cultural dimension previously given in French sociology; the second would result from the rational discussion in Habermasian theory).

the mass media's persuasive techniques. Habermas's diagnosis is that the "structural transformation of the public sphere" throughout history has been accompanied by its decline.

Despite criticism of his model of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Adut, 2008), one aspect remains current in the author's thinking: the penetration of media-specific communication strategies in the formation of public opinion. This aspect is commonplace in analyses of new media's influence on contemporary democracy. To examine it, we focus on how the sociotechnical dimension of digital social networks has mediated public debate as intensely as the mass media, even if sender-receiver relationship is no longer unidirectional, at least technically.

We explore the hypothesis that digital platforms reshape public debate guided by a commercial logic that leads to affectively modulated actions governed by immediacy. The possibility that digital media offer users may produce their own content seduces them into the narcissistic illusion of being fully exercising their freedom. However, content published and forms of interaction are determined by a new spatio-temporal organization typical of the network society and by algorithmic mediation, programmed and constantly updated due to economic constraints and observation of users' behavior.

## Space, time and subjectivity

Manuel Castells (1999) has highlighted the emergence of a new sociotechnical paradigm resulting from the technological revolution that began in the 1970s. In response to the demand for a reorganization of production structure, the development of information and communication technologies led to the emergence of a new type of capitalism: information capitalism. The technical ability to create and process information in a network fostered a new global interconnection infrastructure that reorganized production and consumption based on a decentralized logic. Graphically represented by the relations between numerous nodes and edges, the network society evokes the image of a dynamic and interconnected social organization characterized by the exchange of information in different parts

of the world. Although Castells' analysis focuses economic change, he also explores how sociotechnical features of network society penetrate all areas of human activity.

Before Castells, however, authors of sociology and social theory had already recognized the social, cultural, political and subjective implications of the transformations inherent to late modernity. Anthony Giddens, Frederic Jameson, and David Harvey are scholars who have primarily embraced the theoretical contributions of poststructuralism, taking them as diagnoses of contemporaneity, especially in terms of the new space-time divisions. Modernity establishes global and local connections, changes the dynamics between presence and absence in social relations, and ensures that distant events exert an immediate influence on the various local contexts (Giddens, 1991). Harvey (1992), in turn, explains the "time-space compression" (a phenomenon opposed to the time and space project of Enlightenment) in terms of the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation, a form of productive organization based on simultaneity, decentralization, turnover and appropriation of subjectivity. Jameson had already noted that the space one inhabits in late capitalism is that of synchrony rather than diachrony – of elapsed and irreversible time. "Our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernity" (Jameson, 2002, p. 43).

Since the second half of the 20th century, the space that intersects with time no longer corresponds to the former territoriality that could be circumscribed and mapped in global geography. The old lines that ran through maps and presupposed a long travel time have become shorter, and thus the plane of space is also reconfigured. We speak of the phenomenon of deterritorialization, which removes space from the temporal vector and decouples time and space (Ortiz, 2015). Contemporary subjectivity is thus changing in terms of speed (S/T) in the acquisition and interpretation of meanings. When time plays a lesser role than space in subjective experience,<sup>5</sup> the imaginary, which belongs to the immediate order, prevails over the

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<sup>5</sup> This finding allows us to treat contemporary space-time as "cyberspace", no longer in the sense of a fantasy or potential dimension, separated from reality, as it was referred to in the 1990s, but as a social, digitally mediated space, in which we all are daily immersed (Marzochi, 2016, 2017, 2019).

symbolic (Lacan, 2005). Unlike the symbolic, which has a greater affinity with subjectification, temporality and elaboration through language, the imaginary approaches the thinking that Lévi-Strauss defines as “untamed, uncultivated”, the classificatory thinking that is guided by images and “does not distinguish the moment of observation and that of interpretation” (Lévi-Strauss, 2010, p. 261).

Contemporary media culture and political culture are mutually forged and unfold on the “digital” plane, that is, in a time-space where it is impossible to separate the signified and the signifier. The instantaneous manifestation of positive or negative identification, acceptance or rejection of a sign, symbol or image is what we call here “political narcissism”. In contexts where it prevails, social relations are mediated by the imagination, sensations and impressions, by “sentient representations” (in the Durkheimian sense), and the *self*, instead of the *subject*, appears as the measure of all things. This theoretical approach finds its full confirmation in empirical studies, as in Castells. The author (Castells, 2015, p. 174) defines contemporary activism as *network individualism*, characterized by affinity through the selection of common, although unstable and mutating, projects shaped by personal interests and values. The most stable forms of mobilization, characterized by the mediating presence of civil society organizations, such as social class associations, give way to activism emerging in and through digital social networks, from momentary points of convergence. Affective motivation precedes reflexive elaboration: “The faster and more interactive the communication process is, the more likely the formation of a process of collective action becomes, rooted in outrage, propelled by enthusiasm and motivated by hope” (Castells, 2013, p. 23). Although the author emphasizes that any form of collective action is based on affective motivation, he highlights that in the new context, the importance of affection is reinforced at the origin of mobilizations.

In addition to the impact on social relations triggered by impassioned expressions in social interaction platforms, the phenomenon of the affective primacy of political action as a digital database is densely stimulated, exploited, and manipulated by third parties, corporations, and political groups. The Cambridge Analytica scandal in the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the Brexit, which was decided in a referendum in the same



year, show that the relationship between public debate and social networks conditioned by digital platforms needs to be explored more deeply. Emotion, outrage, immediacy, digital communities, independence from political parties, trade unions and other associations, extreme distrust of journalistic media and political institutions – these are elements that, strictly speaking, can be identified as expressions of authoritarianism and weakening of democratic institutions. The title of Castells' latest book, *Rupture: the crisis of liberal democracy*, sets the tone for recent threats to the democratization process. “[t]his seems to be a critical detail when examining the political behaviour of our times. People categorize and assess the information that they receive based on their pre-existing convictions, rooted in the emotions” (Castells, 2018, p. 60).

## “Public sphere” and digital platforms

José Van Dijck *et al.* (2018) argue that digital platforms have become a new infrastructure of contemporary social life because they have invaded a wide variety of contemporary social, cultural, political, and economic activities, creating a bitter dispute between public and private interests. In the specific case of our research, we are concerned with the conditions of access to information and public debates. Platforms contribute to the modeling of public debate in three ways: Datafication, commodification and selection. Platforms transform objects, activities, emotions, ideas, images and words into commodities. By performing what we call immaterial labor (Gorz, 2009; Lazzarato & Negri, 2013), in which our subjectivity is unrestricted in exchange for the use of platforms, we leave our digital records in all our online activities – preferences, lifestyles and consumption, political choices and positions, exchanges of professional, institutional, personal or confidential messages. We perform work without “free time”, where the “surplus value” no longer corresponds to the contractual overtime, but to the incessant data deposited that can bring profit to the platform. This work cannot always be considered “alienated” because the users are always narcissistic and completely identify with their activity, although they do not know what happens to their production and how it generates capital for digital companies.

As with “alienated labor”, the profit generated from data production by ordinary users is not shared with them. And they are not always aware that, by accepting the “contractual terms” of the platforms that authorize their use, they waive the rights to everything they publish, including confidential data that is not in the public domain. Ordinary users also are not aware of how the products of their subjectivity (thoughts, desires, emotions, experiences, creations, dreams, passions etc.), collected in a utilitarian and impersonal manner, are used to construct and systematize consumer “profiles”. From the massive, incessant and dynamic production of information anchored in the millimetric calculation of the actions of millions of users, a detailed database of human behavior is created.

The platforms rely on users staying connected to continuously generate data (raw material for the resold database) and also for advertising to reach potential consumers. They consist of personalized content selection mechanisms through algorithmic work that pushes information deemed relevant to users. Each user receives a certain amount of information – news, posts, links, videos, advertisements – algorithmically driven by previous decisions that form the basis of their “profile”.

Eli Pariser (2011) refers to Google’s search engine as a “filter bubble”. The engine was set up in December 2009 and has begun to personalize results for each user, creating a bias that reflects the individual’s previous choices. Automated personalization has become a key element in filters targeting users of various digital social networks. What might be seen as mere facilitation favors the prevalence of a consensus polarized by the algorithmic targeting of digital network content, reinforcing in-group prejudices and preventing reflection and dialog between dissenting positions.

In a Habermasian perspective, political debate among users on digital platforms is unable to conceptually characterize a “public sphere”. According to Frank Pasquale (2017), what we are witnessing today is an automated sphere in which the public agenda is determined by algorithms that classify content and steer internet users based on the processing of individual and collective search data. Automated information delivery replaces human processing filters (gatekeepers) and therefore, without self-criticism monitoring, encourages the spread of unreliable news from uncertain sources, often culminating in disinformation and dissemination of discriminatory content.

Van Dijck (2016) highlights two other fundamental elements of platform architecture: protocols and defaults. The first constitute the forms and rules of interaction, software configurations characterized by visible interfaces with their buttons, bars, icons, the regulation and display of information required by the user, and the internal (invisible) procedures that govern their activities. The second is characterized by the default configuration of users who have already established in advance some definitions of privacy and interaction with others. Although the default settings can be changed, they tend to establish a common pattern of interaction among users. These are not purely technical definitions, but they are anchored on a basis of values which the author calls the principle of popularity. In other words, digital platforms are socio-technical devices based on an ideology that values competition and gives more visibility to the best rated publications by users, whether they approve or disapprove. The incorporation of buttons such as “Like”, “Follow”, “Share” encourages the maximization of online interaction, enables its quantification and configures forms of sociability through their immediate and visceral nature. To summarize:

[...] platforms tend to include signals of both personal and global interest in their algorithmic selection of “most relevant,” “top,” or “trending” content. In doing so, they privilege content that rapidly generates more user engagement. Automated news selection very much revolves around the principles of “personalization” and “virality”—principles that are fundamentally baked into platform architectures—prompting users to share content with their friends and followers and, hence, soliciting an “emotional” response (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2018, p. 65).

Although digital platforms are not a means of facilitation, but an infrastructure that creates connections, it is important to restore their conditions of action, as their use depends on the contextual actions of particular social actors. Airton Jungblut (2015) defines two ideal types of political agency in online contexts: low and high levels of intentionality. The latter is characterized by prospective, analytical and strategic action. The first, widespread in the age of digital media, is characterized by forms of momentary engagement expressed in a “like”, signing a petition, or sharing certain informative or (audio)visual content. The author argues that the intelligibility of certain political events triggered online is largely to be found

in the role of low intentionality, resulting, for example, in the dissemination of certain content on different digital channels through a combination of individual actions.

The predominance of low intentionality agency, an effect of the architecture of digital platforms, is also characterized by low reflexivity, as the effect of immediate decisions is characterized by little restrained exercise of rationality. There is an asymmetry between this form of agency and that of high intentionality, which characterizes competent actors in the processing and interpretation of data and in the technical domain of the automated features of platforms.

Some actors have access not only to privileged (mega) data, but also to sophisticated social media monitoring tools, as well as advanced technical skills to remain visible on the platforms or to spread certain messages. The emotional and pre-reflexive underpinnings inscribed in digital platforms can be highlighted as the object of manipulation by technically and politically competent social actors. In a sphere based on emotional tones, platforms are mechanisms of exacerbating antagonisms, often leading to political differences being understood from a dualistic logic, “us” versus “them”, based on simplistic and moralizing categorizations of political opponents transformed into social enemies.

## Narcissism and digital media

Digital platforms accentuate pre-existing trends in social reality, contributing to their exacerbation, as in the case of narcissism. The narcissistic phenomena interpreted by Freud, which take on new contours in Lacan’s work, emerge clearly in digital social networks. We observe the mechanism by which, in the processes of identification, the object that exerts a fascination on the individual takes the place of the *ego ideal*. It is no accident that, according to Freud, the term “narcissism” goes back to the clinical description of P. Naecke in 1899 “to designate the behavior in which the individual treats his own body as if it were that of a sexual object”, that is, as if it were the body of another. Narcissism itself would not be a perversion or pathology, but the “libidinous complement of the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation” (Freud, 2010 p. 10).

The highly “polarized” political debate thus contributes to the understanding of a less explored aspect of the concept of narcissism, namely the fact that the object introduced, or to which the ego indulges, is always destined to replace and fight another object that previously took the place of the *ego ideal* and that has now become the enemy. There would be a “good object”, the savior, from whom one expects restitution of losses and restoration of the damage caused by the “evil object”, but which always remains as a denial. This would explain, in part, the fanaticism with which people cling to certain human figures, symbols, or emblems that purify the remnants of “evil”, and also the relative ease with which they replace (or even exchange) these objects.

The paradox is that this second, supposedly good and saving object often requires self-sacrifice, symbolic or real suicide, from the believers, since this would be the only way to completely erase the previous, traumatic object, to which responsibility for all personal failures and suffering is attributed. Since the object is primarily an idea assimilated by the individual and substituted for the *ego ideal*, it may be a person, a project, a political party, a flag, or even a political, ethnic, professional, class, or gender identity. The double mechanism of fascination-rejection – fascination for one object, complementary to the rejection of another object, in the same intensity – would work similarly in all these cases.

The revered and the rejected objects are generally equally overrated. They are regarded as omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient, and their superpowers are to some extent transferred to the persons who introduced them. As with delusions of grandeur, there is an “overestimation of the power of their desires and mental actions, an ‘omnipotence of thought’, a belief in the thaumaturgical power of words, and a technique for dealing with the outside world – ‘magic’” (Freud, 2010, p. 11-12). The overvaluing of thoughts and words, of others and of oneself, is evident in digital social networks, which are very good at exploring this narcissistic component – “What’s on your mind, so-and-so?” With this phrase, Facebook embraces the teachings of Althusser and interrogates the individual as if he or she were the subject. This overestimation of the power of words is evident in the emotional shift experienced by digital network users as they exchange approving or disapproving messages, and in the credibility attributed to

content received digitally, even when it is biased, distorted, or outright false. It is as if the media themselves lend veracity to the content they broadcast; to parody Hegel: What is digital is real.

But what the analysis of this phenomenon teaches, above all, is that the visceral struggles, so dear to human beings, over the world classification, vision and di-vision (Bourdieu, 2003) do not take into account that such objects, which they take as if they were the being itself, are ephemeral, imaginary creations that thwart the perception that the opponent is just another object, just as the image they make of themselves is not their own, but that of the object that has taken the place of the self. These “mirror walls” are not a creation of digital networks, they are present in human culture, which makes use of the imaginary dimension, even if they undoubtedly acquire an unprecedented importance in these networks.

The sociability mediated by digital platforms intensifies these dimensions of human life in society. In times of economic, political and cultural crises, accompanied by a loss of general self-esteem, these trends are amplified. The weakened self finds in such person, project, party, flag or identity a solution that, however, does not culminate in their individual strengthening, rather it aggravates their diseffectiveness, as the self surrenders to the object: “The ego becomes more and more humble and modest and the object more and more sublime and precious, until it finally takes possession of the whole self-love of the ego, whose self-sacrifice is thus a natural consequence. The object has, as it were, devoured the ego” (Freud, 2013, p. 112-113).

Simultaneously with the “surrender” of the ego to the object (“sublimated surrender to an abstract idea”), the functions that correspond to the *ego* ideal fail, especially the criticism that should be exercised by this category. In Freud’s (2013, p. 113) words,

Everything that the object does and demands is right and blameless. Conscience has no application to anything done for the sake of the object; in the blindness of love, ruthlessness is increased to the point of crime. The whole situation may be completely summed up in one formula: the object has taken the place of the ego ideal.

At moments of social insecurity, a number of individuals are expected to replace their ego ideals with one and the same object and, consequently, identify with each other in their egos (Freud, 2013, p. 118). This hypnotic

dependency relationship between them and the embedded object makes the ego even more aggressive towards any other object that is seen as a threat. In the state of collective hypnosis and regression of psychic activity, the conscious individual personality disappears, thoughts and feelings are directed toward a common direction, and affection and immediacy prevails over reflection (Freud, 2013, p. 130). Thus, according to Freud, “a person’s narcissism exerts a great fascination on those who have abandoned the full dimension of their own narcissism”, of the “development of the ego” (Freud, 2010, p. 23).

In what follows, we examine a specific situation of political narcissism mediated by digital platforms. It is a case deemed as moral panic<sup>6</sup> in the sociological literature, but that we rather call moral hysteria, in dialog with psychoanalytic theory, which describes it as a process based on a dualistic logic in which an idealized notion of “us” constructs the other as a threat to the social order. Mass hysteria was triggered by the instantaneous proliferation of digital content that provoked an emotionally charged response to the artistic and intellectual events of 2017 whose themes addressed sexual diversity.

## Moral hysteria on digital social networks

The events analyzed here are consequences of the moral hysteria that has characterized the political debates of the last decade in Brazil related to gender and sexual diversity. Conservative activism against the so-called “gender ideology” led to episodes of mass hysteria triggered by right-wing political actors. These include the so-called “anti-homophobia kit” in 2011, in debates over federal, state, and local education plans in 2014 and 2015,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The concept of moral panic was created by Stanley Cohen (1972) in the 1960s when he characterized certain social phenomena involving intense reactions in the media, in public opinion, and among moral entrepreneurs regarding behaviors and social actors that allegedly violated normative patterns deemed as the basis of social cohesion. The discussion of moral panics has its theoretical origins in the sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism and therefore focuses on the processual dimension of social phenomena. We are aware of the inadequacy of such a theory when it comes to explaining structural causes, even if the operationalization of the concept helps us to understand the phenomenological dimension of the events analyzed. To overcome the limitations of this concept, we use here the concept of moral panic, understood as an internal element of the hysterical structure, thus linking to the previous discussion on narcissism.

<sup>7</sup> On the history of the “moral crusade” in Brazil, see Miskolci and Campana (2018), and Balieiro (2018).

and reappeared in 2017 with attacks on artistic and intellectual events, which are analyzed below.

The first analyzed case of moral hysteria occurred in September 2017 against the exhibition *Queermuseum – Cartografias da Diferença na Arte Brasileira* in Porto Alegre, which was interrupted after an intense mobilization promoted in digital networks and later turned into a critique of the performance of *La Bête* by Wagner Schwartz at MAM in São Paulo. The second case occurred also in São Paulo, in November, against the presence of philosopher Judith Butler in Brazil, when a protest outside the building where the philosopher was addressing a lecture echoed live on digital media by right-wing agitators.

Although we prefer the term “hysteria” to “moral panic”, to emphasize the unconscious process of denial of desires projected onto the object of rejection, some traces of the concept of “moral panic” listed by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) are also indicative of hysterical behavior: (i) consensus (the widespread perception in society of a particular issue causing panic); (ii) concern (the widespread understanding that the threat is “real”); (iii) volatility (when an issue emerges as a problem at a particular time and tends to disappear shortly thereafter); (iv) disproportionality (concern based on false or exaggerated perceptions) and; (v) hostility (movements in response to specific groups or individuals blamed for the threat).

In both cases, the same unconscious process unfolded from the construction of a “scandal” (Adut, 2008), the origin of which cannot be understood without the mediation of digital social networks. According to sociologist Ari Adut (2008), a scandal depends on a contextual relationship between an alleged transgression and the public response. Issues that are tolerable in private contexts, when made public and addressed to a sensitive audience that perceives them as transgressions, can become the target of public reactions. Thus, the scandal enabled the reactivation of a perception that had been incited by conservative activists who sought to curb advances in sexual and reproductive rights by viewing them as threats to children. Initially, the scandal enabled the realization of two elements of moral panic: the expanded consensus on the existence of a threat, “gender ideology”, and the location of the threat in specific actors who in turn became nationally known and targets of persecution and hostility.



Digital social networks are a favorable terrain for spreading scandal, for the publicity they allow for certain events, for fostering more passionate forms of engagement, and for the ease of instantaneous sharing of written messages, images, and videos. It is also worth adding the agency dimension of social actors in the case of moral hysteria. Its spread depended on a very deliberate action by certain actors who knew how to instrumentally exploit the affective and immediate dimensions of digital social networks. By this we do not mean that this was a deliberate case of moral hysteria, rather it was a strategic action by various actors for momentary political purposes, including the national prominence of emerging actors on the political stage.

The closure of the Queermuseum occurred four days earlier, on September 6, 2017, because a post on the website *Lócus*,<sup>8</sup> featured some selected works from the exhibition and accused Santander Cultural of promoting pedophilia and pornography (Silva, 2019, p. 243). Footage of artworks, archival images, and other material attributed to the exhibition was circulated to link it to moral violations. In response, the Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL, or Free Brazil Movement) organized a campaign to boycott the exhibition and the sponsoring bank. Some exponents played a prominent role in interpreting the events, given their national influence and projection. On his YouTube channel Mamãefalei, Arthur Moledo, a representative of the MBL and now a deputy of the state of São Paulo, gave his view of the exhibition:

Are education, culture and diversity works of art with zoophilia, pedophilia, trans children? [...] this is clearly part of an authoritarian leftist agenda. People want to impose this in an authoritarian way, not only on adults like us, but also on children and young people.<sup>9</sup>

A few days after the exhibition was closed, another art exhibition became the subject of public discussion: the performance *La Bête* by Wagner Schwartz at the opening of the exhibition *Panorama de Arte Brasileira* at the Modern Art Museum of São Paulo, inspired by the work *Os Bichos* by Ligia Clark. In the presentation “the naked artist manipulates a plastic replica of one of the sculptures from Lígia Clark’s series, inviting

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.locusonline.com.br/2017/09/06/santander-cultural-promove-pedofilia-pornografia-e-arte-profana-em-porto-alegre/>. Accessed on February 13, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiSNvXJYmP4>. Accessed on July 28, 2020.

the audience to move the different parts of his body through the hinges” (Silva, 2019, p. 244). The spread of a video of the performance showed a moment when a child participating in the presentation touched the artist’s ankle. Kim Kataguirí, a leader of MBL, now a congressman, released the titling it: “The exhibition at the Modern Art Museum in São Paulo is one more showing the lack of common sense and decency of people who want to pursue a criminal and harmful agenda for our children”.<sup>10</sup> In the video he says: “And I do not know what kind of fetish these people have for children! (...) Why would they do this to a child? (...). So, why? For what reason? What is the intention behind it?” The interpretation of the two MBL members associates art exhibitions with a left-wing political agenda that would preferentially be addressed to children.

The wave of moral hysteria had its final consequences when Gaudêncio Fidelis, the curator of the *Queermuseum* exhibition, was summoned to appear before the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on November 23, 2017, which investigated mistreatment of children and adolescents. The Public Prosecutor’s Office opened an investigation on allegations of inappropriate content for children in Schwartz’s performance. Besides, the artist also testified for nearly three hours before the 4th Special Police Station for Pedophilia Prevention. Following the repercussion of the controversy on digital social media, he claimed having received death threats.

Still in the heat of the scandal surrounding the exhibition, Judith Butler came to Brazil in early November 2017. as one of the organizers of the international conference *The Ends of Democracy*, held at SESC Pompeia and hosted by Universidade de São Paulo in collaboration with University of California Berkeley. At the time Butler also gave a lecture at the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp) to present her latest book, translated into Portuguese, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. Although the American philosopher is one of the references in contemporary feminist theory, her extensive work focuses on a wide range of topics: from feminist studies and queer theory to reflections on ethics and political philosophy. Although her speeches during the visit did not focus on gender issues, she attracted opposition as she was considered the main proponent of the so-called “gender ideology”.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/kataguirí.kim/videos/vb.833053646745836/1668934713157721>. Accessed on July 28, 2020.

Bernardo Kuester, a previously little-known YouTuber, posted a video titled *#FORABUTLER - The Creator of Gender Ideology Comes to Brazil*,<sup>11</sup> in which he connects the philosopher's work to art exhibitions held in previous months deemed to be products of the "gender ideology" allegedly conceived by Butler. An online petition was prepared for the cancelation of the lecture at SESC Pompeia, which was signed by more than 370 thousand people.<sup>12</sup> Groups both for and against the presence of the philosopher gathered in front of SESC Pompeia, including the emerging group Direita São Paulo, under the young leadership of Douglas Garcia. The demonstration took place on the street in front of SESC and, although gathered few participants, it was broadcast live by some of the organizers<sup>13</sup> on their digital networks, reaching a larger audience. Butler was portrayed as the incarnation of evil: Posters associated her with the devil, and a witch doll with her face was burned in public, echoing an inquisitorial symbolism.

Although the demonstrations did not prevent the philosopher's participation, the persecution continued. A video posted on YouTube by her opponents and spread on digital networks shows that Judith Butler and Wendy Brown, both professors at the University of California, Berkeley, were attacked as they checked their luggage at Congonhas airport in São Paulo. Insults in English and Portuguese were directed at them: "You are evil (...) You are pedophile", "pig", "murderer", "corrupter of minors", "You are not welcome in Brazil!", "no gender ideology!", "You murder children!". The protesters unfoundedly associated Judith Butler with "pedophilia", "child sexualization" and "infanticide".

Although moral hysteria as a collective phenomenon is characterized by volatility, irrationality, and incitement to passions, it is strategically deployed and manipulated by political actors interested in advertising and campaign support. Thus, it is not about genuine ideological conviction, but rather about political opportunities to increase popularity and distract the opposing field. For these reasons, we consider that the term "moral crusades", which keeps appearing in studies of similar phenomena, is insufficient to explain the relational and ephemeral dimension of digital

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7l348rFl7\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7l348rFl7_o). Accessed on July 28, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.citizenngo.org/pt-br/fm/108060-cancelamento-da-palestra-judith-butler-no-sesc-pompeia>. Accessed on July 29, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1344536215651041>. Accessed on July 28, 2020.

activism, even if it is ultraconservative in nature. Analyzing the sequence of events, one can see the electoral success of right-wing activists who, once elected, will not necessarily support particular banners against sexual diversity, gender equality, reproductive rights etc. Depending on the ideological tides, discourses alternate in a relational, distinct, reactive way, especially in Brazil, where “cordiality” and “characterless heroism” have already inspired beautiful works.<sup>14</sup>

The 2018 elections were marked by allegations of mass diffusion of fake news by supporters of Jair Bolsonaro about Workers’ Party (PT) candidate Fernando Haddad via WhatsApp. One of the false messages spread was that the PT’s candidate had distributed penis-shaped baby bottles to daycare centers in São Paulo when he was mayor.<sup>15</sup> Such an allegation, in principle, could only be taken as a cheap and malicious fabrication. However, the mass diffusion of the news itself makes us aware of how receptive a certain audience could be to such a message.

During the election campaign, in an interview to *Jornal Nacional*, Jair Bolsonaro – disregarding the rule that did not allow the showing of material – brought up a book by French author Hélène Bruller titled *Sexual Apparatus and Co.* and claimed it was about the “gay kit” distributed in schools when Haddad was still minister of education. The falsity of this “evidence”, a French book presented as if it were a material produced by the Ministry of Education, shows that the then-candidate used this strategically to convince voters of the alleged threat posed by his opponent.<sup>16</sup> The ideological distortion of a public policy to reduce homophobia, developed under the responsibility of the Department of Education in 2011, boosted his career as a congressman. That year, he drew attention in the media (digital and analogue) after “denouncing” the material developed in the Ministry, calling it a “gay kit” that was understood as an attempt to “sexualize children” and promote “pedophilia”. His stance on the issue has remained a key ideological underpinning of his political campaigns ever since, until he became president in 2018.

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<sup>14</sup> We refer to the works of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil*, and Mário de Andrade, *Macunaima*.

<sup>15</sup> <https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/estadao-verifica/mamadeiras-eroticas-nao-foram-distribuidas-em-creches-pelo-pt>. Accessed on July 20, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> <https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/livro-citado-por-bolsonaro-no-jornal-nacional-nao-foi-distribuido-em-escola-23021610>. Accessed on July 20, 2021.

The unfolding of these examples of moral hysteria reveals an expression of the political narcissism that has gripped ideological contestation in Brazil. Inspired by different political actors who called themselves liberal or conservative, this case was responsible for the symbolic construction of “evil”, materialized in art, educational or academic events, that should be eradicated, preventing the initiation of dialogue between opposing groups. More than that, it contributed to the resurgence of the right-wing anti-intellectual and anti-scientific culture that proved to be a major public health risk in the fight against the Covid 19 pandemic. This national tragedy is mostly due to the construction of that supposedly “good” object, “evil” purifier: the candidate Jair Bolsonaro, whose campaign sought to link him to Christian tradition and his military past, and who (confirming Freudian theory) was able to claim “mortal sacrifices” from his supporters.

## Final remarks

The analyzed phenomena express the *zeitgeist* in an exacerbated form and are examined as a new type of indicator in the broadest sense of qualitatively capturing contemporary political culture at the national level. Digital platforms are installed in a context of fragmentation of subjectivity and synthesize features of the present such as the primacy of the category of space over time, immediacy, simultaneity, omnipresence, immanence, Manicheism and the absence of depth. From a theoretical-empirical point of view, there is a paradox, because these characteristics are in contradiction with democratic values. The process of political subjectivation, instead of volatility and the imperative of cathartic passions and attitudes, requires a certain consistency, knowledge of institutions, ideologies, political history, and the cultivation of the ability to dialog with those who hold antagonistic positions. From a theoretical-philosophical point of view, subjectification presupposes a certain “alienation”: that individuals be able to perceive themselves and their condition as alien, to see themselves from the outside and to make themselves the object of thought. To do this, they must practically find themselves in a frame that is beyond them, leaving the terrain of immanence and the contingencies of the present. However, in a situation where space prevails over time, instead of opening up to symbolization, there

is a universe of fixed classifications that turn the social world and otherness into atavistic realities. Therefore, imaginary, uncultivated, classificatory, “wild” thinking (Lévi-Strauss, 2010, p. 261) prevails over political rationality that presupposes time for reflection.

In modern democracies, subjectification would ideally take place in discussions in the “public sphere”, understood as the totality of encounters – even informal ones – between individuals in different spaces and times of everyday life. The subject, then, would only be constituted in a dialog situation in which the recognition of the *other* is at stake, providing that the interlocutors place themselves in a third frame beyond the self, the transcendent dimension of language. However, in online contexts, where the phenomenon of spatialization is more prevalent, political debate is mainly guided by “transference” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1992, p. 514-516) and “identification” (Freud, 2013, p. 118), when unconscious desires are actualized on certain images and words, shifting affects from one representation to another. These mechanisms would explain the hysterical manifestations and reactions to the overvaluation of emblems, images, slogans and expressions circulating in the digital social networks, allowing a large number of individuals, which are dispersed though connected through the media, to identify with each other as opposed to what they consider threatening.

The fragmented individual does not separate the signifier from the signified, letting narcissism, the imaginary, and the difficulty of perceiving the interlocutor and his linguistic content as alterities, and not as mere reflections or extensions of his own, prevail. On the other hand, the subject does not stand in the frame of the individual, the *ego* or the *self*, but rather of an *other* for the self. The subject is a product of decentering, able to “to give the mind a certain power of transcending experience and of adding to that which is given to it directly” (Durkheim, 1989, p.43-44) and to communicate through concepts. The starting point of the subject is always the individual (the *I*, the *ego*), which is still centered, but it is only through decentering that it is constituted in a temporal sequence that enables dialogical and spiral movement between interlocutors. In this sense, experiences in communal associations through bonds of affinity and identity, which Maffesoli (2007) calls “neo-tribalism”, would reinforce the imaginary and narcissistic

dimension of the individual and suppress the dissident and truly creative impulses of the subject.

Fragmentation manifests itself as the loss of individuality for the group that lends identity to the individual, even if the latter moves across several communities and finds his or her “essence” in all of them (substantialism, typical of the phenomenon of fragmentation). Subjectification, on the other hand, concerns the “control that has to be exerted over the lived experience if it is to have a personal meaning, if the individual is to be transformed in to an actor who is inserted in to social relations and who transforms them without ever identifying completely with any group or collectivity.” (Touraine, 1995, p. 220). Subjects are not confused with the community, the nation, the ethnic group, the society, the sexuality, the religion, the consumption, the party, and so on. They are always “villains” for freedom and resistance to power (Touraine, 1995, p. 233). In conclusion, it is worth returning to the assumptions of Durkheimian sociology, according to which individuals would submit to the extent that they would free themselves from the senses and be able to think and act according to concepts, because reason is not of the person, but it is human, “the power which the mind has of rising above the particular, the contingent and the individual, to think in universal forms.” (Durkheim, 1989, p. 331).

From the events analyzed, a scenario of political narcissism emerges in which the definition of general interests and the establishment of consensus through public discussions lose ground for the demarcation of seemingly insurmountable identity boundaries. Digital platforms, far from fostering the flowering of a “democratic culture”, turn out to be the algorithmic materialization of the dualistic, fragmented, and narcissistic thinking present in the various ideological poles and all the “bubbles” of political opinion. When the revolt is fully focused on moral problems and the personification of politics, it opens up the possibility for the main economic groups linked to the most powerful social movements to impose their will and determine the political and electoral outcome of the mobilizations.

This phenomenon is exacerbated in the context of so-called immaterial labor, understood here specifically as the possibility of extracting capital from a wide variety of online activities (work activities or supposed “leisure”/surplus labor) of users of digital platforms, when new, more

subtle forms of labor exploitation develop, “those that go through the processes of subjectification” (Cocco, 2013, p. 9). Even if one refuses to acknowledge – perhaps because of the difficulty of comprehending social changes – that all online activities are immaterial surplus labor, i.e., the surplus value of the shareholders of digital platforms, the fact is that the permission to use these platforms, without which contemporary life is no longer feasible, is the payment for the information we produce and which is expropriated from us. But unlike in classical capitalism, we use digital networks without restrictions and out of our own volition, even though we do not know the economic destination of the data provided. In other words, when the alienation of labor in the classical sense disappears, that is, the alienation in the process of exploiting capital-generating activities, such as the monetization of activism through digital platforms, the economy is no longer problematized and the attention of social movements turns to manifestations focused on morality and identity.

However, the conclusions presented should not be considered all-encompassing. In the analysis of phenomena undertaken here, an attempt has been made to consider a number of structural and conjunctural aspects of the social, economic, political and cultural spheres, and not only technological changes as determinants of ongoing processes. Nevertheless, we would prefer to focus on the recent political situation in Brazil, which has circumscribed the system of relations under study in such a way that it can serve as a model for explaining and understanding similar phenomena. However, we emphasize that, as Max Weber taught, sociological objectivity lies in the choice of a critical, sometimes exaggerated, point of view that guides the researcher in the selection of traces of reality that can be reconstructed coherently in terms of a theory – always subject to verification. In other words, any perspective of analysis is biased towards the “infinity of the real”, which undoubtedly limits the scope of sociology, but also opens up possibilities for it.



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