



Article

The Moralization of Politics in Brazil

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Abstract

This article analyzes the formation of a media framing of political moralization in Brazil that was consolidated during the decade of 2010, during the peak of an anti-corruption prosecution and the campaign against ‘gender ideology’. This media framing was characterized by the association of the agenda for probity in the conduct of public business with a traditional family morality. The research methodology is anchored in studies of media framing in an analytical perspective that joins sources of digital sociology to political communication studies to analyze an archive collected on platforms of social networks and news media. We contrast the results of the investigation to contributions and gaps of political sociology and gender and sexuality studies focused on either public or private morality. The analysis of the materials shows how the far-right developed a political-communicational strategy on social networks to unite the two dimensions of morality to gain electoral support.

Keywords

‘Gender ideology’, media framing, moralization of politics, Operation Lava Jato, techno-mediatized public sphere

One year and eight months after her close re-election, Dilma Rousseff, president of Brazil from the leftist Workers Party (PT, *Partido dos Trabalhadores* in Portuguese), was removed from office by the National Congress. Her destitution revealed contours that we will define in the following pages as the ‘moralization of politics’. During the Chamber

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of Deputies session that impeached Rousseff, broadcast on national television in April 2016, various voices of the Brazilian right who supported the measure pronounced their votes in the name of God and family. The political judgment was preceded by agitation on social networks that extended to street demonstrations against the PT government and in support of the anti-corruption investigation and prosecution known as Operation Lava Jato [*Carwash*]. Almost always held on Sundays, the protests were described by the major media as ‘family’ events, which appeared to be indicated by the demonstrators’ affinity with the police forces, with whom they took *selfies*.

One of the most important and conservative newspapers in the country, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, denounced a crisis that was not only political and economic but also moral, and some of its editorials divided the society between the ‘good citizens’ who defended the political condemnation of the president and their opponents who were identified as the corrupt left (Alves, 2016). A simultaneous campaign in defense of the family emerged on social networks, feeding conflicts over the National Education Plan and related state and municipal measures, in opposition to what the right called ‘gender ideology’.

The political conflicts took place in a new media ecosystem, which became our object of investigation, and appear to have taken issues of gender and sexuality to the center of debates. Through a perspective of digital sociology and political communication studies, our objective is to reconstitute a framing in which the media coverage and the communicational strategy of far-right groups on social networks converged to create what we call a ‘moralization of politics’. Here we understand this not as a meritorious concern for probity in public business, but as a media framing created for political and electoral purposes.

Historically, the anti-corruption agenda has been electorally popular in Brazil as attested to by the victories of candidates who promoted it, such as Jânio Quadros in 1960 and Fernando Collor de Melo in 1989.¹ The PT, when in opposition to the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994–2002), also brought the issue of corruption to the public agenda. Until the scandal known as the Mensalão [or allowance, an alleged corruption scheme to buy Congressional votes to support proposals of the Lula government] (2006), the PT had an image as an ethical party. But since the judgment of those involved in that scheme (2012), the party came to be presented by the right-wing opposition as intrinsically corrupt.

In the second half of the decade of 2010, the moralization agenda catalyzed collective indignation against denunciations of corruption and a supposed threat of corruption of children, contributing to Rousseff’s removal and the election of political representatives who presented themselves as anti-system. To understand how this took place, we begin the article with the presentation of the methodology of this research focused on media analysis.

Methodology

The data were collected between 2017 and 2021, and accompanied conflicts over gender and sexuality that became critical in the period between 2011 and 2018 elections that led far-right politician Jair Messias Bolsonaro to the presidency. We collected editorials and news articles published in leading Brazilian newspapers, magazines, and news sites, as well as posts, texts, and videos from far-right groups and leaders found on social networks. These materials, collected manually, were used as empirical sources to examine

how mainstream media framed political conflicts and contrast this with how the far-right framed the same events.

The analysis of the archive is anchored on the qualitative approach of media framing studies. Goffman (2012 [1974]) understood framing as the way that people see reality through previously formed interpretive matrices. Entman (1993) applied the concept to explain how the media structures the news by promoting certain interpretations of events. Linström and Marais (2012) argue that the qualitative approach of media framing allows observing the emergence and consolidation of an interpretation of reality in a historicized manner. In this direction, we proceed to a systematization of the empiric material with the goal of encountering recurring themes and the lexicon mobilized by the media and the extreme-right, which also helped to reconstitute a timeline that allows identifying the emergence of the framing of moralization of politics.

From a sociological perspective, we also seek to analyze the framing in the correlation of forces between different social actors. An understanding of how the media represent reality requires attention to the way that the framing is now disputed between conventional media corporations and new actors in digital media, especially the far-right and its supporters (Balieiro, 2022). This helped us to identify the emergence of a framing that associated public with private morals, dimensions that were treated as parallel themes by studies about the period.

As a sociological study conducted with a historical perspective, its objective was not to focus on the archive we collected, but to associate it with other sources to identify how mainstream media and far-right actors contributed to the creation of a hegemonic frame. The main object of the research was how the Brazilian extreme-right creatively incorporated the mainstream media frame and adapted it to its political objectives. As mediatic interpretations of reality, frames can be compared with other empirical sources, like those provided by history and social sciences, to discuss their limits and deepen understanding of a period.

The frame and the events that led to its crystallization could not be recognized without a close dialogue with available studies from political sociology and gender and sexuality studies. In this article, we want to contribute to overcoming gaps found in the fields mentioned, addressing the framing of the 'moralization of politics' in a historic perspective. To do so, we present the reconstitution of Brazilian political conflicts in the 2010s in dialogue with the critical academic work about this period and identify the elaboration of an anti-corruption framing by the professional press. We then explore the appropriation of this framing by groups that articulate the denunciations of the political party system to a campaign against 'gender ideology' in a public sphere molded by digitalization. Finally, we discuss how the new media ecosystem allowed the far-right to create a counterpublic, at which it aimed the framing of the moralization of politics to make itself electorally viable.

Political conflicts and anticorruption framing

Any discussion about the political conflicts in Brazil during the decade of 2010 requires considering the street protests throughout the country in June 2013, which have generated a vast critical fortune. In the line of political sociology, this bibliography can be divided

between studies that examined the origins or characteristics of these demonstrations (Barreira, 2014; Singer, 2018); from those that focused on the mobilization processes (Alonso, 2017; Telles, 2016) or on the democratic crisis (Avritzer, 2016; Nobre, 2022). In dialogue with this bibliography, our research data allow identifying the emergence and strategic use by the far-right of the framing that we call ‘moralization of politics’.

We do not consider the ‘moralization of politics’ as an effective program of interest groups, but first as a political marketing strategy developed to gain supporters and voters.² Much of the far-right that came to power in the 2018 elections had composed or came to associate itself with the political system investigated by the Operation Lava Jato and that was punished by the courts. During the period of the Bolsonaro government (2018–2022), Operation Lava Jato’s prosecutorial task force was dissolved without great fanfare, under the interpretation promoted that the far-right was by nature honest.

Our objective involves understanding the strategic uses that the far-right makes of the media, which requires considering what was identified by Avritzer (2016: 67) about the demonstrations of 2013: the media coverage came to be characterized by what was called intermedia agenda setting, that is, the dispute for public opinion between the conventional media and media groups that influence public opinion.³ On the right-wing, some of these groups emerged in the context of the pro-impeachment street protests and would later compose an alliance around Bolsonaro’s candidacy. This alliance articulated them in an innovative and powerful communicational strategy that Nobre proposes understanding as a type of digital party – based on work by the Italian researcher Paolo Gerbaudo (Nobre, 2022: 107).

In dialogue with the contributions of Avritzer and Nobre, we consider that the dispute over the political agenda and its framing in the contemporary public sphere require bringing to the center of the analyses the emergence of a new communicational infrastructure that began to be consolidated with the demonstrations, at a time when access to cellphone connections began to reach most of the population and, according to authors such as Van Dijck (2016), the media ecosystem controlled by the oligopoly of Silicon Valley companies became hegemonic.

Before we go deeper into the description and analysis of this change in the communicational structure and its later impact on the formation of the framing of ‘moralization of politics’, it is necessary to take a step back and briefly present how, since 2013, Brazilian society entered into a cycle of street protests organized over social media and that were associated with themes that contributed to the growing polarization of public opinion. In the reading of Barreira (2014), the demonstrations can be understood as an expression of a very old historic phenomenon, that of collective indignation. This would explain the absence of a defined agenda of demands and the contradictory forces that converged in the protests. Studies such as those by Alonso (2017) show that they arose from the accumulation of economic, political, and cultural pressure until they exploded as collective indignation: the consequences of the international economic crisis that began in 2008, combined with the political divergences of social segments with the PT government. Under the leadership of the Movimento do Passe Livre (MPL) [Free Fare Movement], an autonomist leftist group, the agenda to lower bus fares and the defense of free transportation was at the origin of the demonstrations.

Avritzer (2016) highlights the progressive change from an agenda focused on the defense of social policies to a fragmentation of progressive and conservative agendas. The pluralization of agendas and the emergence of conservative groups in the demonstrations represented a rupture of the monopoly of the left on popular mobilization prevalent in Brazil since at least the end of the military dictatorship (1964–1985). For Avritzer, they were the result of a series of contradictions that accumulated during the PT governments: the fruit of a conjunction of the crisis of the model of governability of coalitional presidentialism with the accumulation of conflicts between civil society and the government, which were amplified by the growing perception of corruption, an agenda that, according to an Ibope poll at the time, was the main motivation of those who occupied the streets.

The streets expressed the indignation inspired by the condemnations by the federal Supreme Court in December 2012 of important Brazilian politicians. In the words of Alonso (2017), ‘The environment of instability was fed by the judgment of the Mensalão which, instead of pacifying, stimulated the spirit of ethical cleansing of the press and public opinion’ (pp. 53–54). The televised and print coverage allowed the framing of the judgment as a division between the good, personified in the judges and the corrupt, the political class, especially the PT.

While some of the most important members of PT were condemned in this judgment, it was the June demonstrations that shook the popularity of the Dilma Rousseff government, whose approval fell from 57% to 30% (cf. Singer, 2018: 99). For Singer (2018), a descending mobility to the ‘lower middle class’ is one explanatory factor that led the traditional middle class to the streets, the same group that accompanied the televised broadcast of the judgment and followed the criticism of economic policy on the news. On the other hand, the new working class perceived that the chances to socially rise had stagnated. In the words of Telles (2016), ‘the economic retraction tended to dilate the popular dissatisfaction, because citizens were inclined to blame the decline in their personal situation on deviations of public funds promoted by government’ (p. 112).

After intense conflict in 2014 and growing media exposure of the anti-corruption investigation Operation Lava Jato the following year, many demonstrations were organized by groups such as Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL) [the Free Brazil Movement], Vem Pra Rua [Come to the Streets], and Revoltados *On line* [The Revolted Online] to demand Rousseff’s impeachment. The street demonstrations, at first fragmented, gained cohesion and, according to Alonso (2017), ‘solidified the moralizing rhetoric, as public moralization (anticorruption) and as moralism (nation, religion, family, traditional social values)’ (p. 56). At the end of the year, the political judgment of President Dilma Rousseff began under the fragile pretext that she had used presidential decrees to allow the government to borrow funds without Congressional approval.

The fight against corruption is an integral part of a democratic agenda, but does not coincide with what we call moralization of politics: a form of a simplifying media framing that attributes the problem to actors (individual or collective) who personify the malfeasance in public administration. In the second half of the decade of 2010, this framing emerged in the large communication media, but as we discuss in detail in the following section, it was reappropriated – with the demonstrations of 2015 and 2016 – by

far-right political groups to instrumentalize the indignation of public opinion in its favor, with the objective of confronting institutions, parties, and politicians.

In this historic context emerged not only the anti-political and anti-party rhetoric (Telles, 2016), but something as important as them and that could be understood to encompass them: a moral framing of public life. It is possible to recognize a moral foundation in all political disputes, but here we refer to something different and more radical: the colonization of politics by a moral code. The discussion about morality goes back to the classical sociology (cf. Weiss, 2015), and the approach focused on the issue of the origins of political action was theorized by Edward Thompson (2018) in 1971.

The English Marxist historian affirmed that there was a ‘moral economy’ behind the protests of the English peasants and rejected any economic determination, such as scarce resources, for the understanding of the origins of popular revolts. It is first social norms and obligations, when they are found to be broken, that are the true motivators of protests and not merely the lack of bread (cf. Fassin and Lézé, 2018). This interpretation can be associated with the perspective of Honneth (2003) when he considers a moral grammar of social conflicts anchored in struggles for recognition. Fassin (2018), in turn, sought to develop a general theory about the concept of morality and the moral economy, returning to Thompson and other authors, and redefining it as ‘the production, distribution, circulation and use of moral sentiments, emotions, and values, norms and obligations in social space’ (Fassin, 2018: 71).

The understanding of the Brazilian conjuncture of the middle of the decade of 2010 does refer not only to a moral substrate that underlies political demands, but also to the reduction of politics to a moral framing, articulated by the media in the anti-corruption campaign and in the agenda of the opposition to so-called ‘gender ideology’. This framing generated engagement of public opinion by reducing complex power relations to a simple dilemma between right and wrong, good and evil, hero and thief. Linda Skitka (2010) affirms that people experience moral convictions as objectively true, universally applicable, and inherently motivating. Garrett (2016) explains that moral convictions trigger a distrust of political authorities, punitive attitudes, and even an acceptance of political violence (p. 2). The framing of ‘moralization of politics’ can be understood as a contemporary strategy of engagement of sectors of public opinion in political and electoral disputes. Even if focused on segments, they tend to have effects on public opinion as a whole by promoting discord and preventing the formation of consensuses.

Through political communication, it is possible to affirm that political conflicts take place within a dominant framing about national life. Society is broad, heterogeneous, and capable of offering a spectrum of problems for collective discussion, hence the role of the media in filtering the issues considered more relevant and bringing them to the scrutiny of public opinion (San Andrés and Castromil, 2020). The establishment of an agenda is, therefore, the result of disputes and selections that involve political, economic, and media agents. When a society defines what it considers to be more important, another dispute then enters the scene: that of framing. Under what perspective will the theme of the moment be evaluated? This is a complex question that involves various competing actors, but that, despite differences, tends to be responded to by the definition of a hegemonic framing, and eventually some alternatives.

Here we consider hegemonic framing to be the ‘moralization of politics’ that emerged in the large press entities and was reappropriated strategically by the far-right since the pro-impeachment protests to strengthen its agendas, such as the struggle against what they call ‘gender ideology’, which contributed to their electoral victory in 2018. One of the aspects mentioned by the scholars of Brazilian political conflicts is the dissemination of an anticorruption agenda by the conventional media, which was initially responsible for promoting the moral indignation since the denunciations of the Mensalão scandal in 2006.

Vieira (2021) identified a segment of polemicists who conquered growing space in newspapers, magazines, and blogs that reach the editorial market. The book *Lula é minha Anta* (2007) [Lula is my Fool] by Diogo Mainardi spent 20 weeks on the bestseller list, and the book *No País dos Petralhas* (2008) [In the Country of PT bandits] by Reinaldo Azevedo republished some of the writings in his blog on the site of the magazine *Veja*. Their analyses linked corruption to the PT, giving origin to a series of neologisms and offenses that became frequent in the publications of this segment.

The bibliography about the conflicts that began in the decade of 2010 tends to emphasize the antipolitical and antiparty rhetorics without articulating them to the themes of differences. Even if they eventually mention or characterize the supporters of the far-right as predominantly formed by White, middle- or upper-class men, heterosexuals, and conservatives, it does not articulate these characteristics in the analysis of the conflicts and in the forms of social mobilization. In the next section, we present data from our study that help to understand how issues of gender and sexuality gained centrality in the Brazilian political conflicts because they allowed the creative reappropriation of the anti-corruption framing by the far-right.

The political-communicational strategy of Brazil’s far-right

Parallel to the corruption scandals that motivated the street mobilizations, the far-right led a campaign against ‘gender ideology’ (Balieiro, 2022; Miskolci, 2021), which refers to the supposed danger of a corrupt government entering the private realm through culture, universities, and above all schools, threatening children, families, and the nation itself. Politicians and parties were accused of being ideological corruptors, which allowed the far-right to present itself as an alternative to those to whom they attribute the theft of public money and corruption of families. While the anticorruption agenda of public business may have had more appeal to a segment of the middle and upper classes, that against ‘gender ideology’ probably resonated among the popular classes, the religious and elderly, segments more fearful or reticent of the changes brought by the recognition of the rights of women and the LGBTI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersexual, and other) population.

The analysis of discourses in the Federal Chamber of Deputies and how they are treated by the professional press indicates that this campaign began in 2011, when a group of politicians gained the attention of public opinion by opposing the distribution in schools of educational materials against discrimination of LGBTI+ . It highlighted the leadership of then federal deputy Jair Messias Bolsonaro, who baptized the material the ‘Gay Kit’. The use of the term ‘gender ideology’ only began to spread between 2014 and

2015 (Aragusuku, 2018: 11), in debates about national, state, and municipal education plans, which allowed the confluence between the anticorruption agenda and that opposing 'gender ideology' during the periods of the demonstrations calling for Rousseff's impeachment in 2015 and 2016.

The moralization agenda had contributed to the expressive electoral performance of Jair Bolsonaro in the 2014 elections to the Chamber of Deputies, when he launched a communication strategy aimed at national projection by using social networks. In the 2018 presidential elections, this obscure politician from the 'low clergy' who invented the factoid of the 'gay kit' presented himself as an alternative to the moral corruption of the political system. The accusations of malfeasance in public administration and his opposition to 'gender ideology' projected him as a representative of virtue and patriotism, reviving a conservative and authoritarian imaginary, emphasized by his alleged religiosity and military origin.

His electoral campaign reinforced the attribution of systemic corruption in the country to PT which, at the time, had its top leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, jailed in the Operation Lava Jato investigation and unable to run. Bolsonaro thus disputed the election with PT candidate Fernando Haddad, which allowed him to return to a debate he had when Haddad was Minister of Education and Bolsonaro denounced what he called the 'sexualization of childhood' and 'incentives to homosexuality' in educational programs. In an interview with the most popular television news program in Brazil, the *Jornal Nacional*, the far-right leader exhibited a book of a French writer as if it was the 'gay kit' created by his opponent. His supporters circulated on social networks and apps the false charge that Haddad had distributed erotic nursing bottles in daycare centers when he was mayor of São Paulo. Thus, Bolsonaro represented a supposed moral reposition and a traditional hierarchy in contrast to the immorality attributed to the left.

The context prior to the campaign was already characterized by media disputes between political poles. The left was associated with the partisan and political system and the far-right presented itself as anticorruption and anti-partisan. Based on the analysis of moral conflicts that developed in the second semester of 2017 (Balieiro, 2018, 2022), it is possible to highlight the importance of the campaign against 'gender ideology'. It was manifest in various ways: in denunciations of the artistic exhibition QueerMuseu in Porto Alegre and of an artistic performance at the Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM) of São Paulo; and in the persecution of philosopher Judith Butler in her visit to Brazil. Groups aligned to the far-right projected themselves in the digital media, denouncing supposed corrupt plans by the left in all these episodes. This tactic also made viable candidacies of some of its leaders to federal, state, and municipal legislatures.

In December 2016, a Federal Police operation called PhD was launched to investigate supposed channeling of funds at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. By 2018, similar operations took place at universities in six more Brazilian states (Miskolci and Pereira, 2019). At the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, the operation led to the suicide of the provost. The political moralization agenda appeared to take the form that sociology calls moral panic, with the persecution and criminalization of artistic and educational activities, but, as we showed, it all involved a new media ecosystem that transformed the dynamics of the disputes of interest groups for segments of public opinion.

The intensification of the media exposure caused profound changes in social and political life, especially because media consumption is now ubiquitous, continuous, and segmented (Castells, 2015). The agenda came to be disputed between the major media and social networks. Above all, the media framing of what gained the attention of public opinion was no longer centralized as in the era of mass communication. We live in a period in which political actors act mediatically by competing in a market for attention in which they dispute interpretations about events with the goal of winning over public opinion or some of its segments. The moralization of politics thus emerged in a context marked by disputes of framing in a digital architecture that encouraged the formation of moral segments apt to instill controversies.

Studies in the field of gender and sexuality sought to understand the campaign against 'gender ideology' independently from political conflicts of the decade of 2010 mentioned in this article and focus on the identification of intellectual mentors and institutions involved in a presumed anti-gender offensive. The contributions of these studies are notable for returning to the genesis of the theoretical formulations of its antagonists by reviving texts of religious and lay authors from the 1990s (Corrêa, 2018; Junqueira, 2018). They also analyzed the eruption of this perspective in Latin America and Brazil (Biroli and Caminotti, 2020; Miskolci and Campana, 2017; Prado and Corrêa, 2018), especially since the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Brazil for the opening of the V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate (CELAM), in 2007.

The emphasis of most of these studies on religious actors portrays dynamic conflicts as a moral crusade constructed by religious political elites and associated interest groups while ignoring the local social and historic dimensions that led the gender debates to the center of Brazilian politics. By not reconstituting a broader framework of the national singularities, they neglect the analysis of the role of mobilization of non-religious actors, given that the diffusion of the notion of 'gender ideology' in the Brazilian context took place since 2014 (Aragusuku, 2018), a time when Junqueira (2018) showed that the influence of the Vatican on these issues lost strength with the beginning of the papacy of Pope Francis.

In contrast with most of this specialized bibliography, some studies seek to locate the conflicts and contextualize them, as in legislative disputes and in civil society organizations concerning gender issues (Balieiro, 2018, 2022; Deslandes, 2015; Miguel, 2016; Miskolci, 2018, 2021, 2023). Thus, they recognize the adhesion of secular rightwing groups in the promotion of the notion of 'gender ideology' that became key not only in the opposition to sexual and reproductive rights but also toward the PT governments and the left.

The notions of moral crusade, moral entrepreneurs, and moral panic are recurring in the studies since the second half of the decade of 2010 and were used to characterize the dramatic way that supposed threats from 'gender ideology' were constructed by the moral entrepreneurs at the time. Originating in the United Kingdom in the 1970s (cf. Cohen, 1972), the theory of moral panics highlighted the affective elements involved in generational conflicts and hierarchical challenges. The focus on moral panics emphasized the bold response of the collectivity to behavioral transformations, also highlighting the character of the moral judgment at their foundation. Along with the strong points of the theory came aspects that we now recognize as deficiencies, such as the view of society as having a homogeneous morality.

It is now more feasible to recognize that this panic originated in frictions between interest groups in a propitious social and historic context, and not as a mere strategic invention of a social segment. In this sense, critical reviews have been conducted, ranging from McRobbie and Thornton (1995), which emphasize the impossibility of analyzing moral panics in the terms of a univocal society in moral and media terms. To the contrary, they highlight the fragmentation of mass society and the proliferation of voices that mark other dynamics of its manifestations. Hier (2019) highlights that these transformations intensified in the digital era, emphasizing the broadening of the deviation by the media, in a society that is no longer characterized by an interdependent relationship between the mass media, the established political system, and cohesive audiences. These transformations are thus increasingly susceptible to intervention by various actors who can reinforce or question the accusations.

Even if the campaign against 'gender ideology' in Brazil had taken on the characteristics of a moral panic, it was always marked by disputes and opposition. Given the decentralization of the media, it did not result in a homogeneous adhesion in Brazilian society, but in segments familiar with this type of mobilization. During the polemic around the QueerMuseu exhibition, we identified that the dispute for framing involved three main actors: the MBL, which denounced the exhibit, artists, and activists who defended it, and professional journalism, which covered the issue for the broad public. While a moral segment, mobilized by the MBL, saw the exhibit as a perverse leftist agenda for the 'sexualization of children' and 'pedophilia', activists defended the exhibit from 'fundamentalist religious' detractors. The materials collected and analyzed show that, differently from what the artists and activists affirmed, the group that led the campaign to close the show was not religious but an exponent of the far-right that had emerged on social networks. The journalistic coverage sought to remain neutral, but the closing of the exhibit proved that the framing created by the MBL, through the strategic use of social networks, had won.

The media transformations reveal a phenomenon different from that addressed by theoreticians of moral panic: instead of an asymmetric relation between the moral entrepreneur and those they labeled as 'deviants' or abnormal, political actors occupied the center of the dispute for media attention, in an effort to construct framings with an appeal to segmented audiences that helped break collective consensuses. The erosion of the public sphere as common ground for the dispute of projects and formation of consensuses encouraged the consolidation of niche ideological enclaves and moral projects such as a moral segment based on the defense of the hierarchical model of the traditional family and another unified by agendas of equality and recognition.

The differences between the moral segments also reveal conflicts between social classes and generations. University spaces, artistic exhibitions, and part of the televised programming and coverage of the main journalistic vehicles came to be more familiar with demands for recognition of human rights. While segments with more schooling and those aligned with linguistic and cultural repertoires from universities tend to incorporate these agendas, refractory segments were identified by the far-right as a potential electoral base and as supporters of conflicts and debates in the new communication ecosystem.

These conflicts lead us to another analytical line that studies of gender and sexuality have at times triggered: that of cultural wars (Hunter, 1991), a US phenomenon that dates

to the end of the Cold War and the proposal of a conservative wing of the Republican Party to substitute its anti-communist discourse for that which Patrick Buchanan summarized in a 1992 speech as a 'battle for the soul of America'. Hartman (2015) shows that this perspective resulted from the discussion about what the US nation would be and a conservative reaction to the counterculture and transformations in social hierarchies since the 1960s: 'The new America that the 1960s created – one that is more pluralist, secular and feminist – was constructed on the ruins of a normative America' (Hartman, 2015: 5–6). Universities and portions of the higher income population were at the front line of these transformations, and thus composed an elite with the knowledge and power needed to reorient society in a more liberal direction.

The interpretation of social and electoral cleavages as a cultural war was made by the US right-wing, and therefore since its origin is a conservative diagnosis, and not by chance, it focused on culture and values while giving little attention to economic inequalities. The resentment against the liberal elites could be explained in material forms, given that they are educated at universities that provide them the best professional opportunities in competition with many who become their critics. In the line critical of the diagnosis of cultural war, there is an extensive bibliography in US sociology and political science that discusses – based on opinion polls and surveys – alternative forms of analysis and understanding of political disagreements in US society (Baldassari and Park, 2020; Hunter and Wolfe, 2006).

In the perspective given priority in this article, it is important to emphasize the role of coverage by the major media, interactions on social networks, and above all, how recent electoral disputes contribute, and not only in the United States, to a framing that emphasizes increasing division and distance in society. Returning once again to the Brazilian case, the country's singularities should be recognized. They begin with the fact that we do not have a bipartisan political system and have not undergone an experience of detraditionalization similar to that in the United States. Meanwhile, the point of political inflection that began in 2013 and was consolidated through pro-impeachment demonstrations in 2015 and 2016 is inseparable from the intensification of the contradictions specific to our society, like the accumulation of disagreements in relation to government programs implemented in the PT governments and Supreme Court decisions. Among the sources of these disagreements, we highlight actions implemented since the second (2002) and third (2009) national human rights plans, and mainly Supreme Court decisions (2011) that recognized same-sex marriages and then defined them as equal (2013), which shook the traditional concepts of the family.

The analytical lines that focus on moral panics and cultural wars prove to be fragile when applied to Brazil's unique social context, especially at a time of consolidation of a public sphere marked by a greater dispute for the agenda and its framing. The campaign against 'gender ideology' influenced the reappropriation by far-right groups of the framing of the major media around corruption. This reappropriation took place through the strategic use of social networks, where public issues mix with the private sphere, in a framing in which the administration of public assets combines with family morals. We call this synthesis political moralization, which strengthens the support for interest groups that sought to consolidate the impeachment agenda and later provided important support to electoral victories by the far-right.

Conclusion

The popular support for the anticorruption agenda and the campaign against a gender perspective in education came together, between 2014 and 2016, and were consolidated in 2017 and 2018. Evidence for this is that the two fronts were led by then federal deputy Bolsonaro. The opposition to human rights was echoed in his vote for impeachment, which he justified as being in support ‘of the family and the innocence of children in schools’ and in homage of the man who tortured Rousseff during the military dictatorship (1964–1985). This thus consolidated a moral framing that would help transform him into a political leader and, in this favorable context, paved his path to the presidency in 2018.

Contrary to how the situation appeared to us at the beginning of the study, the arrival of themes such as gender and sexuality to the center of the Brazil’s political conflicts did not generate a shift from redistributive conflicts to those for recognition, because the theme of moralization served both as a barrier to demands for equality and as a smoke-screen in relation to social inequalities. When a political battle is transformed into a moral one, the political adversary is qualified as the enemy, while the role of a virtuous political actor is attributed to oneself, the defender of the good and the truth.

The creative reappropriation of the framing of moralization by the far-right was only possible due to the opportune political moment made viable by the structural transformation of the public sphere, which in the perspective of some researchers was expanded (San Andrés and Castromil, 2020), automated (Pasquale, 2017), or techno-mediatized (Miskolci, 2021). Regardless of the perspective, the great challenge for social analysts today is to articulate historic conflicts particular to their society with technological and media transformations. The Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) shook the hegemony of the large commercial communication entities, allowing the production and promotion of information without editorial filtering, and facilitated the formation of networks arranged by affinities, encouraging political engagement and action. In mid-2010, even more than today, the fragile government and social regulation made the networks a free territory for the construction of alternative information networks whose operations supercharged discourses without evaluating their veracity, rewarding radicalism, given that it sought only to expand interactions within the platform. Recent history has proven that these characteristics favor conservative and extremist groups.

Berry and Sobieraj (2014: 7), upon analyzing the segmentation of the US media in recent decades, affirm that it came to be characterized by what they call outraged discourse, which combines the production of moral indignation with an effort to gain emotional responses from the public. These characteristics intensified in Brazil in the recent past decade during which was formed the so-called ‘filtering bubbles’ (Pariser, 2012) or ‘echo chambers’ (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016) of the digital platforms. Our empiric field suggests that political discussions on social networks and messaging apps can contribute to moralizing debates, reducing themes of political discussion that involve identifying and analyzing differing positions in dynamic and complex contexts by recognizing politics to be transparent and requiring only moral positioning against an enemy. The operational logics of communication by platforms and messages benefit proposals for immediate solutions to complex questions, which in the political field is reflected in the translation of political engagement into moral judgment.

The moralization of politics is a framing that took shape schematically through at least two articulated tactics, one which is political and another communicational:

1. The articulation mentioned between struggles against corruption of government and the 'family', which blurs the borders between the public and private, leveling the specificities of politics and creating the illusion of equivalence between national and family issues, always in favor of the latter. In this sense, it becomes plausible for political leadership use family values to exercise a type of mission of purification of institutions and to have them bend to values of the good citizen, who is supposed to be simply the follower of this leader and/or moralizing cause;
2. To make viable the previous tactic required developing a communication strategy that knew how to use the digital networks with simple and direct messages, appealing to common values that tend to be spread widely, especially when they come from family members, neighbors, and friends. The digital social networks were an efficient, economic, and fast means to the formation of an engaged and faithful base of support that was attracted and aggregated by the mentioned moral framing, its reductionisms, and anti-democratic potential.

These articulated tactics of political communication and marketing were implemented in a new media ecology that is more suited to the objectives of extremist political groups that, in the era of the mass media, had to dispute with moderates in the public sphere, exposing itself to greater collective scrutiny and facing greater opposition in the formation of a segment of cohesive and faithful support. The new media ecology allowed the far-right to get around the gatekeepers of the professional communication entities, avoid the limits that the conflicts expose them to in the mass media, and construct, through social networks, a monopoly on social segments that we can call counterpublics (Fraser, 1990).

The formation of these counterpublics dates back at least to the context of the demonstrations for the impeachment of Rouseff, with the formation of groups capable not only of organizing massive demonstrations but also of reappropriating the political agenda, by producing its respective framings in the social networks. The political radicalization was established in the period that we analyze in this article, forming an alternative public sphere organized around its moralizing ideal and incarnated in its political leader in the struggle against a supposedly corrupt system. Without the political communication centered in the social networks, perhaps it would not have achieved the blurring between the public and private needed to transform criticisms of the establishment into a political movement with anti-institutional potential, which is more palatable and popular because it presents itself as moralizing. The result of the media framing of moralization of politics was not the fight against corruption, but the steering of the collective indignation against institutions.

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Notes

1. Jânio Quadros' successful electoral campaign promised to 'sweep out corruption' from Brazil. Decades later, Fernando Collor's campaign proposed the moralization of public administration. Ironically, Collor was impeached for corruption allegations.
2. Lellis and Dutra (2020) also examine the 'moralization of politics', which they do not consider as a strategic media framing, but as something effective that originated from the economic recession and the inability of the political system to respond to accumulated social demands.
3. Addressing a similar subject, Kessler et al. (2022) analyze how far-right politicians act as digital influencers in four different Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia). While their study focuses on the actors, ours focuses mainly on structural aspects of the same kind of political and communicational disputes.

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Résumé

Cet article analyse la formation d'un cadrage médiatique de moralisation politique au Brésil qui s'est renforcé pendant les années 2010, au plus fort des poursuites pénales pour corruption et de la campagne contre « l'idéologie du genre ». Ce cadrage médiatique se caractérise par l'association de la priorité donnée à la probité dans la conduite des affaires publiques avec une morale familiale traditionnelle. La méthodologie de recherche employée s'appuie sur les études sur le cadrage médiatique, dans une perspective analytique qui associe les sources de la sociologie numérique aux études sur la communication politique pour analyser un ensemble d'archives collectées sur les plateformes des réseaux sociaux et des médias d'information. Nous comparons les résultats de cette recherche aux contributions et aux lacunes de la sociologie politique et des études sur le genre et la sexualité axées sur la morale publique ou privée. L'analyse des données extraites montre comment l'extrême droite a développé une stratégie de communication politique sur les réseaux sociaux afin d'unir ces deux dimensions de la morale à des fins électoralistes.

Mots-clés

cadrage médiatique, « idéologie du genre », moralisation de la politique, opération Lava Jato, sphère publique techno-médiatisée

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la formación de un encuadre mediático de moralización política en Brasil, el cual se consolidó en la década de 2010, durante el apogeo de la persecución contra la corrupción y la campaña contra la “ideología de género”. Este encuadre mediático se caracterizó por la asociación de la agenda de probidad en la conducción de los asuntos públicos con una moral familiar tradicional. La metodología de esta investigación está anclada en estudios de encuadre mediático desde una perspectiva analítica que une fuentes de la sociología digital con estudios de comunicación política para analizar un archivo recopilado a través de plataformas de redes sociales y medios de comunicación. Se contrastan los resultados de la investigación con los aportes y las lagunas de la sociología política y de los estudios de género y sexualidad centrados en la moral pública o privada. El análisis de estos materiales muestra cómo la extrema derecha desarrolló una estrategia político-comunicativa en las redes sociales para unir las dos dimensiones de la moral con el fin de ganar apoyo electoral.

Palabras clave

encuadre mediático, esfera pública tecno-mediatizada, “ideología de género”, moralización de la política, operación Lava Jato