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# A REFLECTION ON IDENTITY POLARIZATION IN BRAZIL<sup>1</sup>

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## UMA REFLEXÃO SOBRE A POLARIZAÇÃO IDENTITÁRIA NO BRASIL

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### Abstract

This study reflects on Brazil's aggravated social polarization based on the mobilization of ideologies and moral values and disputes between those who are against or in favor of identity guidelines. The study is based on empirical data and a review of the academic literature on types of social and political polarization and Brazil's current political and economic situation. The findings indicate that this polarization has created a critical social paradox. The struggles for progressive identity agendas represent an important advancement and political and social vitality in Brazil. However, parallel to their strengthening, they connect with the prescription of the neoliberal paradigm. This weakens investments in structuring and universalizing policies, instead strengthening focused, compensatory, and individualizing social identity policies. In this scenario, the democratic political arena is faced with the obstacle of constructing a public agenda aimed at the collective well-being of the majority of the Brazilian population in a situation of socioeconomic vulnerability.

Keywords: identity policy; universalizing public policies; social polarization.

### Resumo

Este estudo pretende refletir sobre a polarização social exacerbada no Brasil, baseada na mobilização de ideologias e de valores morais, a partir das disputas entre aqueles que são contra ou a favor das pautas identitárias. Este estudo é baseado na coleta de dados empíricos e na literatura acadêmica sobre tipos de polarização social e política e sobre a atual situação política e econômica no Brasil. O artigo sinaliza que essa polarização tem gerado um importante paradoxo social. As lutas pelas pautas identitárias progressistas representam um importante avanço e vitalidade política e social no Brasil; no entanto, elas ao mesmo tempo em que se fortalecem, se conectam com o receituário do paradigma neoliberal que, ao invés de fortalecer o investimento em políticas estruturantes e universalizantes, as enfraquece, para somente investir em políticas sociais identitárias focalizadas, compensatórias e individualizantes. Neste cenário, a arena política democrática se vê diante de uma armadilha para a construção de uma agenda pública direcionada ao bem-estar coletivo à maioria da população brasileira, em situação de vulnerabilidade socioeconômica.

Palavras-Chave: política identitária; políticas públicas universalizantes; polarização social.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of political and social polarization has been observed in several countries. In Brazil, in particular, such polarization has intensified alongside the severe economic crisis the country has faced since 2013. This polarization has been analyzed more frequently in terms of party bias, mainly concerning voting intentions, in research by Borges and Vidigal (2018) and Limongi and Cortez (2010). In contrast, as highlighted by Ortellado, Ribeiro, and Zeine (2022), research investigating affective and opinion-based polarization in Brazil is scarce, leaving the analyses to North American social psychology. Such studies consider the theme of political polarization of emotions and affections dealing with positive and negative feelings between antagonistic groups without analyzing how these social feelings affect democratic debate in the political arena. According to psychologists Tappin and McKay (2019), affective polarization can be characterized by three elements: (i) selective exposure to ideas that confirm an individual's beliefs; (ii) interpretation of information to favor an individual's defended opinion; and (iii) willingness to recall information that underlies an individual's beliefs quickly.

This article highlights the concerning polarization generated in Brazil by the identity policies. Both progressive and conservative political actors trigger and manage identities through speech that attracts the media's attention and impacts public opinion, mobilizing social groups that feed on political hatred and passion. This ultimately individualizes broader social issues, as has been found by Featherstone (1997), Fraser (1997), Agier (2001), Haider (2018), Hall (2006), Lilla (2018), Miskolci (2021), Ortellado (2018), and Risério (2019), among others.

Hall (2006) provides a classic example of what this author calls the "identity game" by analyzing the conservative strategy of US President George H. W. Bush in 1991 and its consequences in the discussion of "identity politics." Hall (2006) proposes that identities are contradictory and mutually "displaced" and that their contradictions act across individuals and political groups. Hall further argues that social class has not served as a discursive device or a mobilizing category for the varied interests of all people, and that no single identity can serve as a "master identity." The author further proposes that rival identifications fracture the political landscapes of the modern world.

The most recent reflections on social polarization are the result of empirical analyses of the phenomenon and types of polarization. These reflections are often imported from the US (FUKS; MARQUES, 2022) and involve the relationship between social polarization and economic crises. They also consider the still-incipient effects of polarization in the political arena on the public space related to dialogue and disputes about the construction of universalizing public policies.

This article aims to reflect on the relationship between globalization, the cyberspace and the effects of the 2008 economic and financial crisis on the intensification of social and political (bi)polarization. Furthermore, it explores the extent to which the political struggle waged in the name of identity policies in the public space can generate traps and challenges for strengthening

Brazilian democracy and decision-making for structural and universalized public policies. This examination is necessary given the vast social inequality and income concentration that has historically existed and continues to exist in Brazil.

## 2. THE TRAJECTORY OF THE CRISIS IN BRAZIL

Since the 1970s, with the oil crises, the capitalist solidarity strategy of the social welfare state in Brazil has been severely affected by the national fiscal crisis. Faced with this crisis during the so-called “Lost Decade” of the 1980s, a new social contract was formed favoring macroeconomic adjustment based on neoliberal policy and state reform, established in the “Washington Consensus” (1989), particularly for Latin America. What was in crisis concerned the State’s provision of social protection. The neoliberal reform of the State, in progress since the 1990s, has had a devastating effect on the supply and quality of public services such as education, health, and social protection for the socioeconomically vulnerable population. This segment forms the largest portion of Brazilian society (COSTA, 2011).

As it underwent restructuring, the Brazilian State began promoting new forms of public administration, which transformed the old “state-centric vision” into a new rationality to increase the strength and effectiveness of the State—“the sociocentric vision” (GRAU, 1998,216). The nation’s power—formerly centered on the State—was extended to a network of relationships and sectoral fields, such as women, young people, retirees, blacks, and ethnic and religious groups. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emerged and were strengthened as unofficial support channels for local (micro-social) projects. Instead of considering society as a whole, NGOs started to develop focused social projects in partnership with governments, international organizations, and business institutes (COSTA, 2011). In Montañó’s (2002) characterization, these spaces began to disseminate neoliberal logic in the formulation and supervision of public policies to the detriment of the articulation and strengthening of the action of the popular classes. Instead, a societal project guided by individualist principles and objectives of domination and exploration was favored. Montañó states that since the 1980s, the World Bank—as an institutional embodiment of neoliberal ideas—began to increase the allocation of resources to NGOs to co-opt social leaders and dampen the ideals of the struggle for social justice.

Given this scenario, several social actors have emerged to argue for their own interests amid uncertainties and social precarity. Solidarity energy, which was mobilized in the 1970s and 1980s in favor of the re-democratization of Brazil, citizenship, and the confrontation of social problems, was co-opted into the state apparatus. In the context of structural adjustment, liberalization of the economy, and privatization of state assets, international neoliberal prescriptions arrived in Brazil to guarantee the strengthening of non-state social organizations. These prescriptions prioritize social

capital and governance and guarantee the efficient execution of government social compensation projects proposed and financed by multilateral development agencies such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (COSTA, 2011; MONTAÑO, 2002).

The country's bureaucratic machine opened communication channels associated with the growth of NGOs and created new legal institutions (federal, state, and municipal councils). These institutions were established to promote widespread participation and social control in government policies following the new Brazilian Constitution of 1988. However, the partnership between NGOs and these councils became a bureaucratic and legitimizing space of governmental discourse in the 1990s that preached participation and citizenship (DAGNANINO, 2004; GERSCHMAN, 2004; OLIVEIRA, 1999). In practice, though, the projects shared with the State "became a perverse confluence," progressively exempting the role of the State as a guarantor of social rights (GERSCHMAN, 2004).

The Brazilian political scientist Ribeiro (2000) stated that, from the 1990s, social action was hindered by social groups that were persecuted and wanted to be compensated. According to Ribeiro, social policies tended to attack social inequality through the idea of the progression of those among the poorest who had merit, that is, due to their proximity to governments, NGOs, and social business foundations. Consequently, the competing claims of social groups, including women, young people, or social activists, fragmented political life. Society was not thought of as a whole. Instead, it was perceived through the relative strength of each social group. According to Ribeiro, the universal and common public spaces were lost. The claims made by these groups were problematic, accentuating the homogeneity of their members to the point of conceiving that only social relations between equals would be possible (RIBEIRO, 2000).

For Jameson (1997), as culture has become one of the logics of financial capitalism, it no longer serves to demand the transformation of infrastructure nor acts as a relatively autonomous expression of social organization. For this author, the dissolution of the autonomous sphere of culture means expanding culture throughout the social domain. At this point, capitalism's cultural change turns to the visual realm, to the culture of the image of ethics and aesthetics (as pastiche), and its enormous diffusion throughout society. As a result, collective identities are fragmented into individual and multicultural identities, making the public space a place for both plural and individualizing recognition demands. These demands, in turn, are eventually coherent within the "game of capital."

For example, the first Lula Government (2003–2006) helps us understand this process with a focus on social identity policies in Brazil. Regarding social participation, the government considerably strengthened thematic conferences and public policy councils to promote gender and racial equality. However, Machado (2020) questioned the qualifications of these council members concerning their technical skills on public policies in the participatory management model now adopted, arguing that these qualifications were based on their experience of reifying and

essentializing their identities and, consequently, ended up segmenting, excluding, and weakening universalizing public policies.

Regarding economic aspects, the Lula government was fortunate in relation to the appreciation of commodities. We wonder whether the government could have expanded universalizing and structuring of public policies with working capital. With the growth of China, the export of commodities increased considerably, favoring the growth of the Brazilian GDP (BANCO NACIONAL DE DESENVOLVIMENTO ECONÔMICO E SOCIAL (Brasil), 2012, p.16). In 2006, the Brazilian oil company Petrobras discovered the pre-salt layer of petroleum reserves. This achievement resulted in a significant increase in oil and gas production in the country (US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) (Comissão de Valores Mobiliários dos Estados Unidos) 2006, p.34). Facing the international crisis of 2008-2009, contagion from the Brazilian economy to its politics occurred based on the project of state intervention in the economy. This situation led to the 2010 election of Lula's successor, Dilma Rousseff (DE PAULA; PIRES, 2017; GUILHERME, 2017, p.5).

During the economic growth under the Lula government, with the increase in the price of commodities, infrastructural development was directed toward realizing mega-events in the country, with the expectation that they would be great investment projects for the country's development. However, these projects were also widely questioned. They included the Pan American Games (2007), Confederations Cup (2013), Soccer/Football World Cup (2014), and Olympics (2016). Meanwhile, the international financial crisis of 2008 generated in Brazil, from 2012 onwards, a profound imbalance between global oil demand and supply, adversely impacting the Brazilian economy (Barbosa-Filho 2020). The Dilma Rousseff government (2011–2015) continued expanding targeted public spending to compensate for restrictive monetary policy. Consequently, the overall fiscal outlook fell, leading to a negative gross domestic product (GDP) (DE PAULA; PIRES, 2017; TATAGIBA; GALVÃO, 2019).

The expansion of the 2008 international financial crisis in Brazil gradually undermined the population's confidence in institutions, especially that of young people, to the extent that the crisis that broke out in Brazilian territory began to affect their living conditions, employability, and future expectations. One result was the so-called 2013 Journeys, when young people came together over the Internet to coordinate their expressions of indignation and general dissatisfaction in the streets (BRINGEL; PLEYERS, 2019). These protests reverberated nationally as a significant political crisis. The trigger for this crisis occurred in São Paulo in early June 2008 against the increase of 20 cents in public transport fares (Movimento Passe Livre) and spread to other capitals in Brazil. In addition, these demonstrations incorporated guidelines that encompassed dissatisfaction with investments in large sporting events to the detriment of the provision of public services and a strong perception of the corruption involved in large sporting events and political representation (DAMO, 2020; MACHADO; MISKOLCI, 2019; MOISÉS; WEFFORT, 2020; SINGER, 2013).

Despite the re-election of Rousseff in 2014, the economic and associated political crises scenarios, aggravated by the Petrobras corruption scandals and construction of public works involving the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) leadership (BARBOSA-FILHO, 2020; DE PAULA; PIRES, 2017), created favorable conditions for her impeachment in 2015, polarizing Brazilian society into PT and anti-PT camps.

In the police and legal field, Operation Lava Jato<sup>4</sup>, together with the Supreme Federal Court (STF), condemned prominent politicians and business people, including the arrest of then-former president Lula, preventing him from running in the presidential race of Brazil in the 2018 elections, which ultimately gave rise to Bolsonaro's victory. In 2018, Bolsonaro won the presidential elections, representing anti-PTism and Brazil's shift to the right (ABRANCHES, 2019; MOURA; CORBELLINI, 2019; NICOLAU, 2020).

During the Bolsonaro government (2019-2022), following the spread of complaints on social media<sup>5</sup>, the STF began to review the procedures of Operation Lava Jato, reviewing the acts and annulling convictions, including those of Lula. This action made him eligible to run in the 2022 elections. The STF's revisionist stance polarized Brazil, with one part defending the STF and another accusing it of practicing judicial political activism in favor of Lula and against Bolsonaro, who lost to Lula in 2022<sup>6</sup>.

Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch's (2016) analysis of the period from 1840 to the present day demonstrated that the impact of the systemic crises of capitalism generates, in the political arena, the effect of two associated phenomena: increases in political uncertainty and polarization. The researchers emphasized that after severe financial crises, voters are attracted by far-right rhetoric and often scapegoat groups like minorities or foreigners, attributing blame to their "enemies." This tendency can be seen, for example, in the impact of the 1929 economic crisis on the rise of Nazism in Germany (FUNKE, SCHULARICK, and TREBESCH, 2016).

In short, the systemic crises of capitalism result in profound social changes that affect the dominant contemporary mentality (ARRIGHI, 1996). Capitalism produced a new form of globalization with the technological revolution and the internet. This trend significantly impacted the paradigms that had been established and accepted until the twentieth century. These changes

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<sup>4</sup> Operation Lava Jato began in 2014 as a task force between the Federal Public Ministry and the Federal Police to investigate money laundering and corruption crimes involving large state-owned companies, construction companies, and politicians from different parties. See also: PEREIRA, Mateus Henrique de Faria and SILVA, Daniel Pinha. Is Sérgio Moro a Negationist? Operation "Lava Jato," Updatism Transparency and Negation of Politics. *Revista Brasileira de História*. São Paulo, vol. 41, no. 87, May-Aug. 2021. Available at: <http://www.scielo.br/rbh> <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1806-93472021v42n87-08>.

<sup>5</sup> Following the allegations, Operation Lava Jato was nicknamed Operation Vaza Jato (Car Wash Leaks). See also: Intercept Brasil and DEMORI, Leandro e GREENWALD, Glenn (2019).

<sup>6</sup> During the review of this article, on November 22, 2023, the Federal Senate approved the Proposed Amendment to the Constitution (PEC), which aims to change the functioning and powers of the STF and establish clearer limitations on the monocratic decisions and actions of the STF and concerning matters that would be the exclusive competence of the Legislature, such as the creation of laws and definition of public policies. This approval generated an intense clash between members of the STF and the Senate, polarizing society. This PEC will probably go to the Federal Chamber of Deputies for evaluation and approval in 2024.



have affected society's institutions, ethos, cultural identities, and behavior, producing changes in the conditions under which individuals and communities were organized. Therefore, globalization and the systemic crises of capitalism are related in a multifaceted manner that generates economic, political, technological, and cultural phenomena that are interconnected and influence each other (GIDDENS, 2000; AGIER, 2001; SENNET, 2008).

### 3. BRAZIL IN CRISIS AND SOCIAL POLARIZATION

During the ongoing crisis, the political right in Brazil was strengthened and won the 2018 elections. They offered a narrative of counter-reaction and radical confrontation with the “politically correct” movement<sup>7</sup>, supported by the national moral fight against ethnic, racial, and gender issues. Their discourse led to the nationalist and Christian conformity expressed in the slogan of the Bolsonaro government: “Brazil above all, God above all” — a reaction to the agendas of identity groups from the left, who were gaining power in Brazil. To prove Brazil's social polarization related to identity policies encouraged by the left, Bolsonaro, in his inaugural speech at the 2019 National Congress, said: “We will unite the people, value the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, and fight gender ideology, conserving our values. Brazil will once again be a country free of ideological constraints.”<sup>8</sup>

As Somer and McCoy (2019,13) maintain, polarization is configured as a process in which groups come to perceive and describe politics and society in the sense of “us” versus “them.” As polarization advances, many feel the pressure to conform to one bloc or another, and their political preferences become a link to social relations. During this process, moral, historical, and socially validated facts and truths increasingly lose weight. Thus, people conform to their own group's messages and truths (SOMER; MCCOY, 2019).

Mason (2018) highlighted that polarization is the concentration of opinion in opposing points of view and the alignment of different political positions. Conjunctures are revealed in (for example, in the United States) black, urban, non-religious, liberal, or Democratic Party supporters behaving in opposition to those with supposedly antagonistic identities: white, religious, conservative, and Republican. Ortellado (2018) stated that in Brazil, political positions are not polarized. Instead, identities exist that reduce heterogeneity. The author noted that the June 2013 protests in Brazil pointed to an ideological overlap between progressive and conservative social movements. For example, he cites the LGBTQI+ movement (considered progressive by the left) as an example. It

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<sup>7</sup> The “politically correct” movement can also be considered a “woke” movement. However, in the late 2010s, “woke” was adopted as a more generic slang term, widely associated with identity politics aimed at the consumer market. See Middleton and Turnbull (2021).

<sup>8</sup> See Bolsonaro's Speech at the Inauguration at the National Congress. <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2019/01/01/bolsonaro-fala-em-combater-ideologia-de-genero-veja-integra-do-discurso.htm?cmpid=copiaecola>.

formed an alliance with the anti-corruption movement (considered conservative). However, according to Ortellado (2018), this overlap has evolved radically in Brazil since 2014, fracturing society into two antagonistic poles (conservatives and progressives) that cannot find common ground.

The polarization of identities has been analyzed since the 1990s, given the expansion of globalization. In his analyses of the cultural homogenization process in postmodernity, Featherstone (1997) observed that identity is no longer simply a matter of individual characteristics and has more broadly come to refer to one's lifestyle. This change implies that identity is not merely linked to who we are as individuals but is related to the values, attitudes, and beliefs we adopt daily. According to Agier (2001), the rapid social, economic, and cultural changes caused by globalization have had significant impacts on individual and collective identities. Agier highlights identity disorders as a response to tensions between local traditions and global influences that occur as communities face challenges in preserving their cultural identities in the face of global cultural homogenization.

Recently, identity politics have received criticism from both Marxist and liberal perspectives. Haider (2018) asserts that identity politics ended up dividing the left. According to the author, a collective of socialist lesbian women in 1977 started the identity movement in the United States (the Combahee River Collective) and defended the construction of solidarity with other progressive groups. The Collective's purpose was to eliminate all forms of oppression and to endure their suffering related to oppression. However, their demands were co-opted by the neoliberal process, creating intersectoral oppressions that generated social divisions instead of solidarity. According to Haider (2018), the identity politics framework reduces politics to what individuals say they "are" to gain individual recognition, thus shifting the focus away from considerations of individuals as social subjects who participate in a collectivity—collectively struggling against an oppressive social structure—which is necessary for a new insurgent universalism.

From a liberal perspective, American political scientist Mark Lilla has consistently criticized American identity politics, first in his article "The End of Identity Liberalism" (LILLA, 2016) and later in his book *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (LILLA, 2018). According to the author, the phenomenon of identity politics has, among other characteristics, an "anti-political approach." Specifically, as individuals look more to themselves than to others, they become resentful and unable to realize the importance of citizenship supported by human and social rights, regardless of their ethnic and social origins, lifestyle, and economic status (LILLA, 2018, p.33–35). The work of Brazilian anthropologist and writer Antônio Risério is in line with the analytical positions taken by Haider (2018) and Lilla (2018). In his book *About Postmodern Relativism and the Fascist Fantasy of the Identity Left*, Risério states that identity politics is postmodern fascism insofar as "it is a space for the miniaturization of everyone, to praise or execrate the other, being, therefore, an intellectually, socially, and humanly fraudulent and impoverishing posture" (RISÉRIO, 2019, p.74–75).



Table I presents some of the thousands of texts published on identity agendas in the Brazilian media, with the aim of exemplifying the current conflict, permeated by offenses and counter-offenses. This volleying signals this polarization's identifiability with the concept of "cultural war" (HOCHSCHILD, 2016; HUNTER, 1991; JUDIS, 2016; TUFEKCI, 2014), where arguments display a dramatic cultural dispute in the cyberpolitical space of social networks and media.

TABLE 1 – EXAMPLES OF DISPUTES ABOUT IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE MEDIA AGENDA FROM 2018 TO 2022, BRAZIL<sup>9</sup>

Article headline	Newspaper / Websites, year	Link
<i>The false dichotomy between identity, agenda and economy</i>	<i>El País Brasil</i> (2018)	<a href="https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/11/06/opinion/1541544431_898684.html">https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/11/06/opinion/1541544431_898684.html</a>
<i>The right won over the popular classes and we got fucked. Identity in elections</i>	<i>The Intercept Brasil</i> (2019)	<a href="https://theintercept.com/2019/01/03/direit-a-classes-populares-identitarismo/">https://theintercept.com/2019/01/03/direit-a-classes-populares-identitarismo/</a>
<i>The cancellation of the white anthropologist and the identity agenda</i>	<i>Folha de São Paulo</i> , 2020	<a href="https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2020/08/o-cancelamento-da-antropologa-branca-e-a-pauta-identitaria.shtml">https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2020/08/o-cancelamento-da-antropologa-branca-e-a-pauta-identitaria.shtml</a>
<i>Identitarianism and the CIA</i>	<i>Tiçãõ</i> , 2021	<a href="https://www.causaoperaria.org.br/rede/tica-o/identitarismo-negro/">https://www.causaoperaria.org.br/rede/tica-o/identitarismo-negro/</a>
<i>Discourse on identity is simplistic</i>	<i>Nexo Jornal</i> , 2022	<a href="https://www.nexojornal.com.br/entrevista/2022/01/10/%E2%80%98Discurso-sobre-identitarismo-%C3%A9-simplificador%E2%80%99">https://www.nexojornal.com.br/entrevista/2022/01/10/%E2%80%98Discurso-sobre-identitarismo-%C3%A9-simplificador%E2%80%99</a>
<i>The contradiction between inequality and identity agenda need not exist</i>	<i>Folha de São Paulo</i> , 2022	<a href="https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2022/01/contradicao-entre-desigualdade-e-pautas-identitarias-nao-precisa-existir.shtml">https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2022/01/contradicao-entre-desigualdade-e-pautas-identitarias-nao-precisa-existir.shtml</a>
<i>Identity agenda, yes! What is the problem?</i>	<i>Diplomático</i> , 2022	<a href="https://diplomatique.org.br/pautas-identitarias-sim-qual-o-problema-2/">https://diplomatique.org.br/pautas-identitarias-sim-qual-o-problema-2/</a>
<i>Racism of blacks against whites gains strength with identityism</i>	<i>Folha de São Paulo</i> , 2022	<a href="https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2022/01/racismo-de-negros-contrabancos-ganha-forca-com-identitarismo.shtml">https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2022/01/racismo-de-negros-contrabancos-ganha-forca-com-identitarismo.shtml</a>

<sup>9</sup> Translation of headlines from Portuguese to English by the authors.

<i>Folha article cites black supremacy and provokes reactions: “Racist columnist and newspaper”</i>	<i>Brasil de Fato (2022)</i>	<a href="https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2022/01/16/artigo-na-folha-cita-supremacismo-negro-e-provoca-reacoes-colunista-e-jornal-racistas">https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2022/01/16/artigo-na-folha-cita-supremacismo-negro-e-provoca-reacoes-colunista-e-jornal-racistas</a>
<i>Risério, ideologue of white gentlemen, distorts the truth about racism</i>	<i>Folha de São Paulo, 2022</i>	<a href="https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2022/01/riserio-ideologo-de-senhores-brancos-distorce-a-verdade-sobre-racismo.shtml">https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2022/01/riserio-ideologo-de-senhores-brancos-distorce-a-verdade-sobre-racismo.shtml</a>
<i>“Structural racism is a fallacy,” says Antonio Risério</i>	<i>Potência 360, 2022</i>	<a href="https://www.poder360.com.br/brasil/racismo-estrutural-e-uma-falacia-diz-antonio-riserio/">https://www.poder360.com.br/brasil/racismo-estrutural-e-uma-falacia-diz-antonio-riserio/</a>
<b><i>What does the editor who published Antonio Risério’s text have to say?</i></b>	<b><i>Comunican do-se, 2022</i></b>	<a href="https://portal.comunique-se.com.br/o-que-o-editor-que-publicou-o-texto-de-antonio-riserio-tem-para-falar/">https://portal.comunique-se.com.br/o-que-o-editor-que-publicou-o-texto-de-antonio-riserio-tem-para-falar/</a>

SOURCE: the authors (2023).

For Ortellado, Ribeiro, and Zeine (2022), this antagonism is exacerbated to the point of near political intolerance. However paradoxical it may be, an alignment exists in the political arena: one side denies all positions assumed by the other, and vice versa. Miskolci (2021) suggests that this alignment of opposition to “the other” arises, in particular, as a confrontation with “politically correct” activism, established and strengthened in the public sphere and marked by identity strictures and the critical/political awakening of the self, as digitally mediatized by social media, without time or margins for social mediation.

In his doctoral thesis, Miskolci (2021) states that “politically correct” activism in Brazil has been a project of behavioral and ideological surveillance promoted by “conservatives of the left” as “a tactic that bets on individual transformations, as if changes in the vocabulary and attitudes had power of social change” (2021, p.75). Consequently, this surveillance and monitoring of social networks ended up promoting conflicts and polarizations to a considerable extent. According to the author, no invitation was offered to dialogue or engage in collective struggles. This neoliberal and individualizing process generates speech monopolies. The actors despise intellectual and political mediations and define who has the power to pass judgments with moral superiority based on the “identity condition” of the victim and the individualization of demands based on the affirmation of making one's identity the essence of everything (pp.70–71). According to Miskolci, this activism ended up generating violent moral disputes, favoring the strengthening of a reactionary mentality as a counter-reaction based on a moral crusade associated with the Christian values of the traditional conservative family (MISKOLCI, 2021, p.58–59).

This identity activism has mainly taken place in the cyber-political space of social networks, which occupy a “new” social-political place, as opposed to traditional public spaces. This cyberspace affected political and social trends in Brazil, emphasizing the 2018 election year, when President

Bolsonaro was elected, fighting identity agendas from a conservative and reactionary perspective (RONCONE; COSTA, 2020).

In 1957, Leon Festinger proposed the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, which explains that individuals seek information to confirm their decisions. When an inconsistency occurs, a state of psychological discomfort arises. Cognitive dissonance leads people to seek to harmonize their ideas or change their behavior to alleviate this tension. According to Rocha (2023), we live in a collective cognitive dissonance in Brazil, where the digital masses are constantly excited in algorithmic bubbles that deny objective data about reality and seek the spirit of sectarianism and fanaticism. In the contemporary post-truth environment, this phenomenon depoliticizes the public debate, advancing the political project of the extreme right in Brazil, of which former president Bolsonaro and his followers are representative.

In these moral and cultural disputes among groups, we will highlight that the focus on the agenda of identity policies, to some extent, can affect the public space in the debate on structural and structuring public policies for Brazil. We will analyze these effects below.

#### **4. THE COMMON GOOD DILEMMA IN THE BRAZILIAN POLITICAL ARENA**

The political arena consists of the field and environment in which social actors (public and private) wage disputes about what will be the public agenda (public problems to be faced); that is, it is the space of conflicts over the materiality of the role of the State (public policies) for the benefit of the community and the common good (FREY, 2000). These conflicts are also manipulated by economic and political elites to include and exclude decision-makers, thus interfering with the conflict's outcome.

In democratic theory, participation in the political arena is guided by the collective action of citizens—despite their identity, ideology, and party differences—who, by interfering in society, seek through a social pact to objectify, recreate, and strengthen the “general will” in favor of the consolidation, protection, and dynamization of citizenship and the most varied human rights. Therefore, political participation presupposes democratic dialogue with the “others” rather than the dispute for recognizing different groups dedicated to opposing themselves with their own particular identities and agendas. Unfortunately, however, in recent years, identity policies have gained centrality in the debate on public policies, sometimes encouraged by the media, intensifying disputes over identities, compromising the possibility of social dialogue, and reducing the scope of public policies.

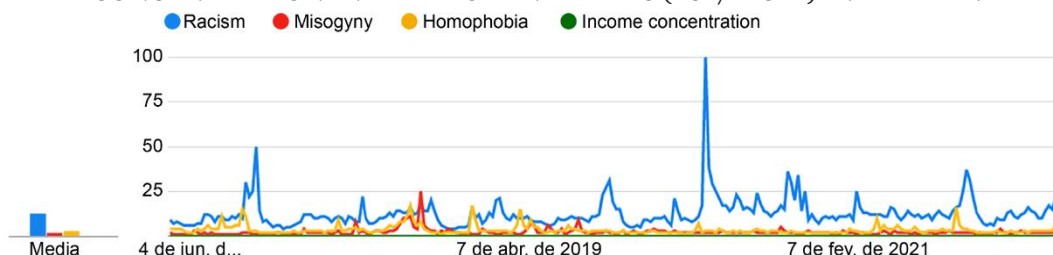
The media play a vital role in the debate on formulating the public policy agenda (agenda setting), setting up a privileged stage for political power disputes, and mobilizing public opinion on which issues should be considered most relevant. According to Azevedo (2004):

(1) The media, by selecting certain subjects and ignoring others, defines which are the themes, events, and actors (objects) relevant to the news; (2) by emphasizing specific themes, events, and actors to the detriment of others, it establishes a scale of prominence among these objects; (3) by adopting positive and negative framings about themes, events, and actors, it builds attributes (positive or negative) about these objects; (4) a direct and causal relationship exists between the prominence of media issues and the public's perception of which issues are critical in a given period (p.52, author's translation). (AZEVEDO, 2004).

To determine the main trends of social media between 2017 and 2022, we used the Google Trends tool, comparing searches using the subjects “income concentration” and “social inequalities” with the terms “racism,” “misogyny,” and “homophobia” in Brazil. Figures 1 and 2 display the results.

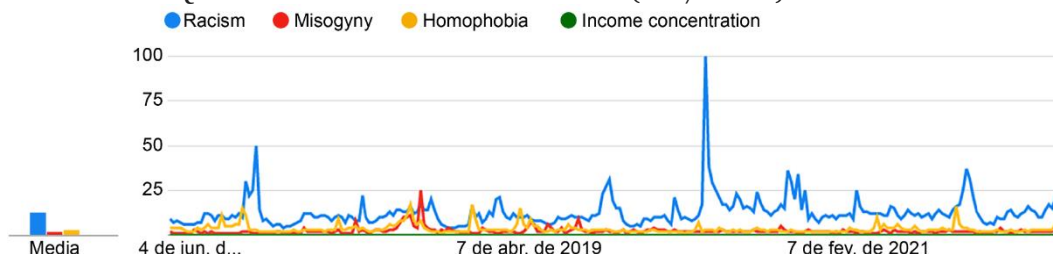
The searches presented in figures 1 and 2 indicate that social awareness has increased positively related to prejudice against blacks, women, and the LGBT+ population, strengthening opposition to crimes and violence committed against these groups. However, when we compare searches with income concentration and social inequalities, we can observe a discrepancy, as these themes seem almost invisible. These data also alert us to the social abyss related to socioeconomic, educational, and cultural factors. The social abyss is the context in which identity factors become apparent.

FIGURE 1. MOST SEARCHES AMONG RACISM, MISOGYNY, HOMOPHOBIA, AND INCOME CONCENTRATION IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS (2017–2022) IN BRAZIL<sup>10</sup>.



SOURCE: Google Trends (2022).

FIGURE 2. MAJOR SEARCHES AMONG RACISM, MISOGYNY, HOMOPHOBIA, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS (2017–2022) IN BRAZIL<sup>11</sup>.



<sup>10</sup> See Google Trends: <https://trends.google.com.br/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&geo=BR&q=%2Fm%2Fo6d4h,%2Fm%2Fo4vfs,%2Fm%2Fod2jtw,concentra%C3%A7%C3%A3o%20de%20renda%20no%20Brasil>.

<sup>11</sup> See Google Trends: <https://trends.google.com.br/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&geo=BR&q=%2Fm%2Fo6d4h,%2Fm%2Fo4vfs,%2Fm%2Fod2jtw,desigualdade%20social>.

SOURCE: Google Trends (2022).

However, the historical relationship between income concentration and inequality is marked by extremes in Brazil. It is a severe structural problem. Historian Schwarcz (2019, p.123) mentions the chronic nature of this inequality, highlighting that, in our history, the capture of the state by private interests is recurrent, resulting in a governmental patrimonialism that reinforces corruptive practices and hinders the effective reduction of social differences. Historically, income inequality has remained essentially unchanged, with the poorest 50 percent capturing around 10 percent of national market income and the wealthiest 10 percent capturing around half. Recent investigations have confirmed the high concentration of income existing in Brazil. Yet the country remains one of the most unequal in the world, currently occupying the 11th position in the world ranking of nations with the worst income distribution (BANCO, 2022; NERI, 2022). The World Inequality Report 2022 (185) recorded that the most affluent 10 percent concentrate 59 percent of national income and the poorest half only 10 percent.

Considering this fact, we should remember that Brazil has never had a welfare state in the full sense of the term. Moreover, the trajectory of inclusion of the Brazilian population has always been fragmented and selective. Santos (1979) reports that the basic areas of collective well-being have continuously been at the lowest point of the government agenda or served by questionable public policies. In addition, the author stated that the Brazilian State assumed a model of solidarity with an administrative structure of low and restricted quality of public services and minimal social coverage. Even with re-democratization and the new Constitution of 1988, no reduction was seen in the share of total income appropriated by the wealthiest minority in the country, nor did the country eliminate several factors that produce and reproduce income concentration and socioeconomic inequalities (MARQUES; MENDES, 2007).

With state reform and the consecration of the neoliberal model in the 1990s, the universalization of fundamental rights began to be contracted due to the fiscal crisis of the 1970s and 1980s. Consequently, public policies became restrictive, emphasizing the optimization of public spending. The result of struggles for rights and structural and universal public policies have become individual and focused political opportunities. The state acts on these according to the financial availability of governments (THEODORO; DELGADO, 2003). This pattern occurs amid the strengthening of the neoliberal conception, influenced by the international concertation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. As a result, the gradual dissolution of social commitments, constitutionally related to the effective universalization of the country's institutional infrastructure, has expanded and greatly affected the country in recent decades. According to Almeida (2011):

In the neoliberal model, the economy ends up developing without considering the social consequences since its main objective is the regulation by the market and individualism and not the concern for social guarantees. The mediation of the market means that social policies, in this context, are planned to repair only its consequences, having, as a result, a focal and non-universal character. (ALMEIDA, 2011, p.149, author's translation).

International comparisons show that in countries where focused public policies predominate, levels of poverty and inequality show higher rates and smaller proportions of the public budget and GDP allocated to social policies (COSTA; SILVA, 2020, p.168–170). Another critical aspect of targeting public policies is prejudice against beneficiaries. According to Costa and Silva (2020), in countries that operate with more universalist policies, access to public resources and services is generally seen as a right associated with the condition of citizenship. In contrast, in more unequal countries, targeted program beneficiaries are often stigmatized as losers.

Suppressing debate on social interventions via focused or universalized public policies is not required. Targeting is not consistently associated with a minimalist strategy, nor is universalization synonymous with a robust presence of the provider state (KERSTENETZKY, 2006). Such strategies must walk through different conceptions of justice that can guarantee social protection and the common good. However, we must be attentive to the predominance of each public policy strategy (focal or universal) in Brazil in favor of social justice and a collective project for the common good.

While agreeing that recognition is fundamental to current public policies, Fraser (1997) criticizes the supremacy of perspectives that incorporate “cultural” constructions of identity as far as these eventuate in social injustice. For the author, such recognition models require remedies that also promote the appreciation of groups and people without group identity, highlighting the connection with material redistribution to these groups. According to Fraser, such people must be recognized in their specificities, allowing identity abstractions (products of oppressive structures) to be transformed into emancipatory social concreteness (FRASER, 1997).

According to Boltanski and Chiappello (2009), we are experiencing the third “new spirit” of capitalism, set in motion in the 1960s, when the demands of aesthetic and artistic criticism began to be incorporated into capitalist concerns, supported by the ideals of subjective individualism, valuing personal choice, authenticity, and freedom, disconnected from concerns for the common good and values such as social equality. According to Santos (1995), the material claims of the working class have become fragile in the face of elements of current capitalism, such as access to collective consumer goods. As a result, previously invisible or unacknowledged social groups have begun to make post-materialist (identity) claims according to the current context of the individualizing capitalist spirit.

Social polarization in Brazil expressed mainly through disputes between different identities, has created pitfalls for efforts to strengthen the democratic debate on what structural social problems are to be fought through a collective project, especially in the context of a severe economic crisis that has been adversely impacting the minds, emotions, and material life of citizens.



## 5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article aimed to articulate the close relationship between globalization and economic, political, and social crises, highlighting the trajectory of economic crises between the 1970s and 2008 and showing how these crises affected government conduct and political emotions through the individualization and polarization of collective and national identities, given the cultural shock experienced in the face of the uncertainties of homogenization on a planetary scale.

In a polarized scenario fueled by social media, people are confronted with information or opinions that challenge their pre-existing beliefs. This confrontation can generate dissonance, as changing opinions can be seen as a threat to collective national identity. In Brazil, the global 2008 crisis manifested in 2013, strongly impacting national politics in the context of the recent re-democratization process and polarizing society, disrupting social cohesion.

We noticed that the intensification of social polarization through identity policies had generated two associated effects in the Brazilian political arena: the near-impossibility of democratic dialogue and the fragmentation of the structural socioeconomic problems to be faced by Brazil. The debate on issues of social inequality became depoliticized, leaving the stage of democracy and further weakening it. Poverty was renamed “group identities,” a process that individualized the reality and experience of poverty. However, Brazil is one of the most unequal countries in the world, where most national wealth has historically been concentrated in the hands of a small elite, excluding most of society.

If the space for dialogue on social participation is obviated by this extreme polarization and based on moral values, we cannot envisage political disputes favoring the strengthening of democratic debate on universalizing public policies that include quality access to collective consumer goods for the majority of the population such as health, education, housing, transportation, basic sanitation, water, energy, and environment. On the contrary, the debate on the public policy agenda is reduced and manipulated by the power of the elites, who provide feedback on the concentration of income and social inequalities. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the government elected in 2022 will have the political capacity to increase democratic dialogue and social cohesion and face the structural socioeconomic problems that affect the majority of the Brazilian population, still excluded from their fundamental rights so that Brazil can recover itself to the social and civilizing demands of the 21st century.

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