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MEMES OF RESENTMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF HOW THE FAR RIGHT MOBILIZES HUMOR AND SENTIMENT STRUCTURES IN PRIVATE MESSAGING NETWORKS

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Introduction

A growing body of literature argues that resentment is one of the key explanations for the global resurgence of the far-right (Brown, 2019; Melo & Vaz, 2021). Authors such as Porto (2023) and Rosenthal (2020) link these new authoritarian landscapes with group resentment, a collective dimension that is manifested in response to progressive and human rights recent advances. Others such as Gerbaudo (2021) and Norris and Inglehart (2019) characterize modern times using metaphors such as retreat or retaliation. Resentment, as encrusted sorrow or revisited grudge, could be the keynote of a latent and silent movement brought about by the advance of liberal democracies.

Populist authoritarian leaders like Trump and Le Pen use resentment to mobilize their audiences. Similarly in Brazil, the negative passions embodied by resentment (envy, pretension, self-pity, hostility, the desire for revenge, grief and grudge) have become important fuel for the moral panic stimulated by Bolsonarism. This study aims to investigate how this strategy is present in memes circulated in public discussion groups on WhatsApp. These groups in private communication services are thus taken as a proxy for what is discussed by Bolsonaro supporters'.

Far right and resentment

Studies on resentment are not exactly a novel field. Ansart (2022) states that the multidimensional nature of resentment should prevent us from calling it by its singular name, instead of the plural resentments. Furthermore, if there are different types of resentment, there are also different intensities that express them. And different ideologies, imaginaries and climates of opinion that give rise to them. Some different

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groups and leaders cultivate resentments, for different reasons and also leading to different consequences. According to Kehl (2020), resentment can be explained by attributing responsibility to the other for what makes us suffer. It is a process of victimization in which one seeks a fantasy of revenge. The resentful subjects are fed by the suffering of others because they are not able to deal with the problem by themselves.

Resentment therefore is the consequence of a self-qualification as a victim. It is the result, first and foremost, of a loss of power or a feeling of aggravation. It is the resistance of those who occupy a position of cultural dominance in an attempt not to give in to the change in the status quo.

Authors who work with such sentiments as their theoretical inquiry focus, such as Porto (2023), claim that resentful groups often experience the loss of power silently, as stated by Pollak (1993). Silence, in this case, is an index of shame at the loss of dominance, but also an essential component of this revanchist imagination. Silence gives rise to the expectation of revenge. And it encompasses a chain of private communications. This is why digital instant messaging networks are so well suited to mobilize through resentment. As long as resentment is communicated through private networks, the expectation of retaliation is nurtured. And as argued by authors such as Phillips and Milner (2020) and Donovan et al. (2022), memes are material devices that make it possible to consolidate these imaginations. They perform symbolically these shared experiences of loss of capacity, and establish a media lingua franca (Milner, 2013) that justifies the retaliation.

Contextualization

Regarding the association between resentment and the rise of far-right movements over the past decade and a half, Porto (2023) provides one of the most comprehensive analyses. Indeed, Porto's work is not the only one to highlight how, at the beginning of the 21st century, Brazilian politics appeared to be moving toward a social-democratic hegemony in the public policies enacted by the executive and legislative branches. However, he is also not alone in presenting evidence that this process entailed significant consequences. Authors such as Iber (2019) argue that the "Pink Tide" was followed by a kind of "nationalist International," composed of conservative governments aligned across Latin America.

In Brazil, the expansion of social and income distribution policies during Dilma Rousseff's presidency laid the foundations for the status panic that unsettled the middle class and propelled the country into a turbulent political crisis. As a social divide emerged between "those who receive" and "those who don't receive" government assistance (Cavalcante, 2015), perceptions of moral degradation became increasingly externalized. Ultra-liberal groups such as the Movimento Brasil Livre, Vem Pra Rua, and others have played an important role as scouts. They have also fomented a certain sexual panic among the working classes (Santos, 2022), which materialized in the so called "gender ideology" critique. In one notorious episode, Jair Bolsonaro presented a booklet created by the program Brazil Without Homophobia, as part of what he called a "Gay Kit" allegedly created by the government to "indoctrinate" children in public schools.

In 2018, different authors (Avritzer, 2020; Rocha & Medeiros, 2021) demonstrated that the Bolsonaro campaign was extremely efficient in constructing a threatening other. Resentment was often used to fabricate narratives that either appealed to status anxiety or moral and sexual panic. Understanding how this resentment is tactically mobilized can shed light on the process of constructing political and social identities within communities and user groups on digital platforms.

Methods

This study adopted a covert research protocol with non-participant observation of some Bolsonaro supporters' discussion groups. The sample was produced intentionally and non-systematically, i.e. the researchers looked at all the images circulated during the period and selected those that met the basic initial criteria defined by the research. These criteria involve attacking minorities and groups that are political opponents of Bolsonaro, especially by encouraging moral, status or sexual panic. Based on these criteria, the researchers arrived at a refined set of 40 images, which were then subsequently analyzed.

The analysis of the images favors interpretative methods (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013) and is based on a multidimensional assessment of the nature of resentment. The memes depict a genealogy of the frustrations and fears that have become entrenched in the country's recent history.

Discussion

We found four main categories of analysis (1) Memes that manifest hostility towards a situation of moral degradation, resulting from the loss of cultural dominance; (2) Memes that attribute responsibility to third parties or use victimizing rhetoric; (3) Memes that emphasize the silent or subterranean transmission of a memory frame; (4) Memes that call for future retaliation.

The memes depict a genealogy of the frustrations and fears that have become entrenched in the country's recent history. The far right was very skilful in transforming collective frustration into a political repertoire. Ultimately, such memes share the promise that those groups or individuals who allegedly brought instability into people's lives will be punished. And since the structure of resentment is based on fantasies of repetition, the libidinal gains from the digital jokes render any serious justification or democratic argumentation unnecessary.

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