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# IS NEOFASCISM MALE? RELATIONS BETWEEN NEOFASCISM AND THE RESENTMENT OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY







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### **Summary**

The objective of this essay is to reflect on the relations between neofascism, especially the Brazilian experience of the government of Jair Bolsonaro, and the resentment of a representative portion of masculinity known in gender studies as hegemonic masculinity. This masculinity is represented by the white, heterosexual, cisgender and virile man. The text makes a brief introduction to the fascist phenomenon, its updating in neofascism from different contexts and seeks to broaden the analysis of the political, economic and social conjuncture of the experience of Brazilian neofascism using the gender perspective from several authors and relating it to Jair Bolsonaro's performance of "imbrochável" and its need for constant affirmation, of the disqualification of women, the exaltation of strength and the concealment of emotions.

**Keywords:** Neofascism; Masculinities; Men; Virility.

O NEOFASCISMO É	¿EL NEOFASCISMO ES
MACHO? RELAÇÕES ENTRE	MASCULINO? LA RELACIÓN ENTI

### NEOFASCISMO E O RESSENTIMENTO DA MASCULINIDADE HEGEMÔNICA

Resumo: O objetivo desse ensaio é refletir acerca das relações entre o neofascismo, sobretudo da experiência brasileira do governo de Jair Bolsonaro, e o ressentimento de uma parcela representante da masculinidade conhecida nos estudos de gênero como masculinidade hegemônica. Essa masculinidade é representada pelo homem branco, heterossexual, cisgênero e viril. O texto faz uma breve introdução ao fenômeno fascista, sua atualização no neofascismo a partir de contextos diferentes e procura ampliar a análise da conjuntura política, econômica e social da experiência do neofascismo brasileiro utilizando a perspectiva de gênero a partir de diversos autores e o relacionando a performance de "imbrochável" de Jair Bolsonaro e de sua necessidade de constante afirmação, da desqualificação da mulher, da exaltação da força e a ocultação das emoções.

**Descritores:** Neofascismo; Masculinidades; Homens; Virilidade.

## EL NEOFASCISMO Y EL RESENTIMIENTO DE LA MASCULINIDAD HEGEMÓNICA

Resumen: El propósito de este ensayo es reflexionar sobre la relación entre el neofascismo, especialmente el fenómeno de la experiencia brasileña bajo el gobierno de Jair Bolsonaro, y el resentimiento de una porción representativa de la masculinidad conocida en los estudios de género como masculinidad hegemónica. Esta masculinidad está representada por el hombre blanco, heterosexual, cisgénero y viril. El texto hace una breve introducción al fenómeno fascista, su actualización en el neofascismo desde diferentes contextos y busca ampliar el análisis de la coyuntura política, económica y social de la experiencia del neofascismo brasileño utilizando la perspectiva de género de diferentes autores. y relacionándolo con la performance del "imbrochable" de Jair Bolsonaro, su necesidad de afirmación constante. la descalificación de la mujer, la exaltación de la fuerza y el ocultamiento de las emociones.

**Descriptores:** Neofascismo; Masculinidades; Hombres; Virilidad.

#### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Brazil has been the scene of an intense discussion about the resurgence of fascism and its updates. This concern gained even more relevance after the institutional coup that culminated in the removal of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and, later, with the election of Jair Messias Bolsonaro.

The political process that unfolded in the country, marked by a media call for **polarization**, was, in reality, another symptom of the crisis and decline of the capitalist system. A crisis that is fertile ground and an indispensable condition for the emergence of the fascist phenomenon and its historical derivative, neofascism.

Fascism is characterized as a reactionary political movement of the middle layers of capitalist society. This phenomenon is intrinsically linked to the social and economic structure of capitalism in an attempt to preserve the interests of the dominant classes that, desperate to maintain their power, see in fascist reactionism the possibility of preserving and restoring their hegemony in the face of the crises of a system and, furthermore, seeks to unify society under a strong and centralized State, led by a charismatic leader and charged with absolute powers. 2

There is no fascism without capitalism. It is fundamental for the analysis of this movement to observe the deep link with big capital, especially in the financing of communications, transport and the arms industry. However, it is in the crisis, decadence and stagnation of the capitalist system that fascism is placed. Functioning as a kind of emergency exit for the ruling classes.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the crisis, its exacerbation and its symptoms are formed as the structuring point of this movement.

Another condition for the existence of fascism is social support, where the point that differentiates it from other forms of dictatorship is located.

Unlike a traditional dictatorship, fascism becomes a dictatorship through social support. In other words, when the political regime is closed, the popular legitimacy that supports democratic restrictions grows. And this adhesion often happens due to the precarious living conditions provided by the crisis.<sup>3(2)</sup>

The rise of fascism was a reaction to the political and economic crises that plagued Europe after World War I. In Italy, Benito Mussolini established the National Fascist Party, starting this movement. Mussolini advocated an authoritarian, centralized, and nationalist state, with the purpose of unifying the nation and reestablishing its greatness. Adolf Hitler in Germany led the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi), promoting a racist, anti-Semitic, and expansionist ideology. Through fiery rhetoric and effective propaganda, Hitler rose to power in 1933, establishing a totalitarian regime. The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) represents an important milestone in the history of fascism. In this conflict, General Francisco Franco led a rebellion against the Republican government, receiving

support from fascist forces, including Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany. Franco's victory resulted in the consolidation of an authoritarian and repressive Francoist regime in Spain.<sup>2</sup>

Neofascism, on the other hand, is seen as a response to the structural crisis of capitalism with roots in the economic crisis of 2008.

It is essential to remember that the crisis has been characterized as a "long depression" crisis for the next 30 years, starting in 2008. It is a matter of understanding it as a combination of low investment product and low productivity growth, resulting from a lower profitability of investment in productive sectors and a change in the field of financial speculation. World capitalism is experiencing a deep depression and is struggling to overcome it 3(3, author's highlight)

In this way, the crisis and neoliberal policies generated social inequalities and weakened labor rights. In this context, far-right movements emerge and exploit the resentment and frustration of certain sectors of the population.

For Löwy,4 the main difference between fascism and neofascism lies in the economic field, where the classic fascist governments adopted a nationalist-corporatist model and the neofascists comply with a typically neoliberal economic policy.

European neofascism cannot be considered a mere repetition of the fascism of the 1930s, as it presents itself as a new phenomenon, with characteristics of the twenty-first century. Unlike the military dictatorships of the past, neofascism respects some democratic rites, such as elections, the existence of political parties, freedom of the press and parliament. However, it is important to highlight that it seeks to limit these democratic freedoms by resorting to authoritarian and repressive measures according to the political situation. This form of neofascism in Europe manifests itself through more subtle strategies adapted to the current context. Far-right movements use democracy as a façade to promote their political agenda, which is often marked by nationalist, xenophobic, and anti-system discourses. While they participate in elections and democratic processes, they seek to undermine democratic institutions, weakening the separation of powers, attacking the free press, and implementing policies that aim to restrict diversity and plurality. It is critical to recognize that neofascism in Europe faces specific contexts in each country, and its strategies and degrees of acceptance vary. However, in the midst

of social dissatisfaction, economic crisis, and cultural tensions, these movements exploit these feelings to gain support and promote their authoritarian ideologies.

In Latin America, the neo-fascist phenomenon takes on a particularly selfdestructive character, exacerbating the conditions already present in the countries of central capitalism. In this context, Latin American countries are marked by the presence of a bourgeoisie that benefits from economic exploitation and the transfer of surplus value from the periphery to the center, resulting in an overexploitation of the labor force. However, during periods of neo-fascism, this bourgeoisie reveals its pro-imperialist character in an absolute way. Curiously, the middle class and fractions of the working class most affected by the crisis are the ones that politically endorse this subservience. This adhesion occurs in the search for another to blame for the crisis, because now the target becomes the compatriot citizen himself. Whether due to economic, ethnic-racial or moral criteria, such as poverty, race, ethnic origin or sexual orientation, these groups are to blame for the crisis, and their existence is dehumanized. In this way, we arrive at the Brazilian neofascist phenomenon that resulted from a heterogeneous sociopolitical and political-institutional coalition within the context of neoliberal capitalism in the country. In this scenario, different fractions of the bourgeoisie came together driven by multiple determinations. These determinations included the economic crisis of stagnation, the class struggle from the top down, with the propertied classes opposing social reforms in an extremely unequal society and also opposing the leftist leaderships that committed themselves to these reforms. The conjuncture was also influenced by the crisis of the traditional parties of Brazilian democracy. In addition, the presence of left-wing leaders committed to progressive reforms was confronted by conservative forces.3

The purpose of this essay is to include in this brief analysis of the conjuncture, a perspective of gender analysis, especially of the masculinities expressed in these movements, their leaders and followers. Why are the main leaders and exponents of fascism and neofascism men? Why are discourses that reinforce a certain affirmation of virility common among these men? Could we compare male and resentful leaders and their followers with a loss of male power, with the portion of a bourgeoisie that, perceiving the erosion of its domination, sees in the adoption of fascist tactics an emergency way out?

### **MASCULINITIES AND THEIR VARIANTS**

Masculinity is a configuration of behavior and practices around the position of men in the structure of gender relations. It is a certain language that begins to be prescribed in early childhood, but is updated throughout the life of men.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that such practices are surrounded by historical experiences that shape and transform the subjects' perceptions of lived reality, that is, places and positions socially constructed throughout the course of a history and a culture.<sup>6-8</sup>

In the nineteenth century, early studies on men neglected the power relations between genders that existed at the time. Instead, the social behaviors expressed by men and women were considered innate and attributed to a masculine or feminine essence. From this perspective, women were associated with the domestic sphere, the education of children and submission to men, while men dominated the public space. Referring to this social structure, Bourdieu<sup>9</sup> says that to praise a man it is enough to say that he is a man. This conception, largely reinforced by institutions such as the family, the church, medicine and law, perpetuated a heterosexist and misogynistic gender regime, considered as a natural and timeless phenomenon.

Discussions about masculinities emerged from the 1960s with the feminist movement that demonstrated inequality between genders as a social construction. It was during this period that the so-called *Men's Studies* began, a movement that initially emerged in the United States and spread to England, Australia and, to a lesser extent, the Nordic countries. Initially, such studies assumed tendentious and revanchist positions in relation to feminism, in addition to the invisibility of homosexuals who in this perspective were not considered men. These were studies produced by men, about men and for men, but which concealed in their intentions a great resentment for a social role that shifted and questioned man as the universal figure. Anyway

[...] by putting an end to the distinction between roles, systematically establishing a foothold in all the domains previously reserved for men, women have evaporated the universal masculine characteristic: the superiority of men over women.<sup>10(6)</sup>

With this, we can conclude that *Men's Studies* are responses to a crisis of masculinities, and these responses were pulled by a very specific portion of men: the

white, cisgender, heterosexual, prosperous and, in this case, American man. It is from this movement that a certain model of hegemonic masculinity begins to be drawn, the standard man who appeared in TV commercials, an ideal of success, a milestone to be reached, an ideal representative of the masculine. Having, then, a model as a reference, it is not enough to be a man, but it is necessary to perform as a man.

However, it is from the 1980s onwards that there has been an expansion of studies on masculinities through the fields of sociology and epidemiology, where power relations between genders are taken into account.<sup>11</sup> Although until this period men were already the object of study, what inaugurates this "new phase of studies on the masculine is precisely the use of the gender perspective as a reference".<sup>12(40)</sup>

According to Welzer-Lang<sup>6</sup>, studies on homosexuality played a crucial role in broadening the concept of masculinities, revealing the existence of internal hierarchies among men. These studies supported the idea of hegemonic masculinity, which takes into account various social markers, such as race, class, ethnicity, age group, and sexuality. In this context, hegemonic masculinity is considered the central model, while other manifestations of the masculine are seen as inadequate, inferior, or subordinate. This phase marked the emergence of the use of the word **masculinities** in the plural, reflecting the understanding that there are multiple forms of masculine expression, which encompass not only hegemonic masculinity, but also that of other men. Thus, in the spectrum of masculinities, experiences are not equally shared by all men. Even so, even with the numerous social transformations that occurred in the post-war period, the hegemonic fraction of masculinities crosses time, following unchanged the characteristics of its representatives (white, cisgender, heterosexual, prosperous man) and its social field.<sup>6</sup>

Hegemonic masculinity is rooted in the sphere of production, in the political arena, in sports practices, in the labor market. And, in all these spheres, the discourse that drives men's practices is based on competition, the insatiable search for success, for power. And it is at this point that masculinity must be proved, and, as soon as this occurs, it is questioned, making it necessary for it to be proven again: its construction is constant, relentless and unattainable. <sup>13(88)</sup>

Although hegemonic masculinity is the model of an ideal, we know that from a statistical point of view, most men position themselves socially in other fractions.

Hegemonic masculinity has distinguished itself from other masculinities, especially subordinate masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity has not assumed itself to be normal in a statistical sense; only a minority of men may adopt it. But it is certainly normative. She embodies the most honorable way of being a man, she demands that all other men take a stand in relation to her, and she ideologically legitimizes the global subordination of women to men.<sup>5(245)</sup>

Over the years, studies on masculinities have demonstrated the countless faces of different expressions of the masculine, such as violence and how much this factor crosses the experience of men. According to data from the Atlas of Violence, <sup>14</sup> of the 590,755 homicides that occurred in Brazil between 2010 and 2020, 92.2% were committed by men, while 7.8% by women.

In a study carried out with 477 male users of a primary care unit in São Paulo, it was pointed out that 29.4% had some type of mental disorder. Among these men, 45.7% had suffered physical and/or sexual violence more than once in their lives and 61.4% had perpetrated some violence.<sup>15</sup>

It is common in the social imagination, since childhood, the conception that being born with a penis implies being virile and strong. From this perspective, masculinity is often associated with the expression of violence, being naturalized and stimulated as a demonstration of virility. However, it is important to emphasize that the categories of definition of violence are preconceptions, socio-historical constructions that imply the exercise of power to guarantee roles or places (objective and subjective). Just as Simone de Beauvoir stated that a woman is not born a woman, but becomes a woman, in the same way it is possible to say that a violent man is not born violent, but becomes violent.<sup>7,10</sup>

In a brief search on Google Images with the terms "masculinities" and "virility" the system shows figures of men holding weapons, in physical fighting, shaving with an axe, with a closed face and muscles showing and an important detail: of 60 images searched, 53 were of white and young men, five were of black and young men and two images were of old men, but muscular. This apparent detail linked to a technological resource is a mirror of the social field where established models show where one should go, what one should be and how one should be.

Virility and violence are part of a constant effort for a masculinity that always needs to be affirmed. There is a constant work of affirming something that will never be guaranteed forever.<sup>7</sup>

Masculinity must be proved, and as soon as it is proved, it is again questioned and must be proved yet more; the search for a constant, durable, unattainable proof becomes so meaningless that it assumes the character, as Weber said, of a sport.<sup>16(111)</sup>

It is in the search for and constant affirmation of this virility that a certain masculine anxiety is situated, starting from the denial of the feminine in oneself and in the other, whether this feminine is a woman or another man. <sup>10</sup> In the 1950s, psychologist Ruth Hartley already said that the boy first defines himself negatively, that is, to be masculine, males generally learn what they should not be, before what they can be... And so, many boys define masculinity simply by saying 'what is not feminine'. There is a fight against everything that can be feminine. <sup>10</sup> For Fátima Cechetto masculinized power is associated with those who control resources and have an interest in naturalizing and perpetuating this control, including in this power the ability to feminize subordinates. As a result, dissident sexualities are stigmatized, violated and threatened with being treated as passive and consequently as women. It is the constant affirmation of the difference with the feminine. To be a man is first and foremost not to be a woman or the image of a woman's social construct: emotional, physically weak, affectionate, caregiver of a home, of the sick and of children. However, the subjective battle against an image of the feminine is not only a striking factor in hegemonic masculinity:

epheminophobia among men who relate to other men, but who worship masculinity and the historical privileges granted to it as the highest value. In the vast spectrum of Brazilian homosexualities, today there is an internal masculinist, white and upper-class hegemony of those who understand themselves as 'discreet' and aspire to be seen as heterosexual, relegating the line of social refusal to others. It is to this space of abjection that the non-white, poor, effeminate, masculinized, in short, the queer, are relegated. 17(23, author's highlight)

In this way, we can point out that **masculinities** is a behavioral, performative and subjective arrangement based on the position of men in the gender hierarchy. Under no circumstances can it be considered something given and stabilized, since it is situated within a socio-historical context and, therefore, forged within a culture. Furthermore, masculinities point to the idea that men are not a universal subject but respond based on

hierarchies that are built based on their social, racial and sexual orientation position. There are many characteristics that involve the performance of hegemonic masculinity in society, but a fundamental characteristic is pertinent to the theme addressed in this work: resentment.

### **NEOFASCISM AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY**

The election of Dilma Rousseff in 2010 altered the course of a river that had wandered placid through Brazilian history. In a universe where "everything was fine" a woman appeared where she should not appear. It is at the height of an institutional crisis that "the reactionary mass movement was formed in 2015 in the campaign for the deposition of the president. From there, after purging, the specifically neo-fascist movement – Bolsonarism – emerged."<sup>1(2)</sup> The coup came, but too late to erase the resentment that had already set in. A resentment that generated insecurity, uncertainty in the future of the resentful portion and was symbolized in the phrase said by Jair Bolsonaro in 2021: "With the reelection of that woman, what is our future? It's not because she's a woman, no, but it's just that the animal is really bad. Mother-in-law is a saint next to her."<sup>18(1)</sup> This same Bolsonaro who referred to a woman, then congresswoman Maria do Rosário, in 2011 stating that she did not deserve to be raped because he considered her very **ugly** and that she was not his **type**.

On June 12, 2021, a motorcycle rally brought together 12 thousand people in São Paulo. The vast majority of them are white, middle-class, heterosexual, middle-aged men. The event celebrated Christian, conservative values and cried out for **freedom** opposing the restrictive measures imposed by the pandemic. On its grip, the green and yellow flag propagated an image of patriotism. On the T-shirts, stickers and banners there is an image of a mythical Jair Bolsonaro: sometimes his face on a muscular body with a military uniform and rifle in hand, sometimes being helped by Jesus Christ. A myth built from the image of the hero, of a champion of **good** who always speaks his mind and in the way that comes to his mind. Bolsonaro, among so many possible definitions and adjectives, represents a way of being a man: a head of the family, white, Christian, pragmatic and reactionary. Of a man who, tired of the advance of social agendas, especially feminist agendas, decided to react to the old style of the time when a **man was a man**. A typical

representative of hegemonic masculinity. The motociata, its agenda, the position of its leader and the context of the established economic crisis is the illustration of what Carnut,<sup>3</sup> Boito Junior<sup>1</sup> and Löwy<sup>4</sup> present as neofascism. However, we cannot make the mistake of understanding these men as the only representatives of Bolsonarist neofascism, remembering that both the middle class and fractions of the working class affected by the crisis endorse the neofascist project.<sup>3</sup>

The former deputy who in a foul and aggressive way spoke his mind, has become the representative of a brute, depoliticized, uninformed and resentful mass that, submitted to the idol-leader and apparently transgressor, vibrates wherever it is maneuvered and for that half a dozen aggressive words are enough. A return to his grandfather's times, where 'things worked' and where there was no **such mimimi** at all. A kind of attempt to return to an original patriarchy of the head of the **family**. Bolsonaro was like a magnet for male subjectivities lacking references that could affirm that they are on the right path, where female growth and participation in the bureaucratic and factory is even accepted, but in the intellectual, especially in the leadership of a country, it is an affront to male values. These values are linked to part of the ideal of hegemonic masculinity such as virility, competition, the repression of emotions, the game in the political arena and the subordination of everything that circulates outside a certain heteropatriarchal norm.

On March 4, 2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, at the time, had already taken the lives of 260 thousand Brazilians, the President of the Republic Jair Messias Bolsonaro, in a public speech during the inauguration of a railroad and referring to the *lockdown*, a sanitary measure defended by science, stated that it was necessary to stop **childishness** and **mimimi** and questioned how long people would be **crying**. Thus, in the image and likeness of the nineteenth century, a direct link between emotion and weakness. As if crying for the dead was something minor and should be considered **childishness**. This masculine ideal of concealment of emotions is a trait present in studies on hegemonic masculinity. Emotions are representatives of the feminine universe and, symbolizing weakness, must be repressed to the point that they no longer exist. <sup>10</sup> It is no coincidence that Bolsonaro's followers repeated throughout the pandemic period the words **childishness** and **mimimi** referring to people who wore masks, protected their children and avoided crowds.

However, the apex of the similarities between the neofascism of the Jair Bolsonaro government and models of hegemonic masculinity took place in a speech on the esplanade of the ministries during the festivities of September 7, 2022 in Brasilia, the president and candidate for reelection drew a chorus to himself of **imbrochável**, referring to the phallus that in his imagination never fails. The eternal insistence on the affirmation of masculinity through virility is what Kimmel <sup>16</sup> says ends up becoming a sport. It is a kind of cycle of affirmation where a man is never a man, but he shows himself to be a man to the extent that he manages to assert himself, in a concrete or, in the case of the president, in a fanciful way.

It is worth mentioning that Bolsonaro is not the only representation of this phenomenon. Other far-right politicians, such as Donald Trump, for example, gain relevance in the public debate around the world. These leaders continue to attract a portion of resentful men who seek to match the idealized masculinity of times past, like that of their grandfathers. This intersection between neofascism, hegemonic masculinity, and politics reveals a troubling connection between power, domination, and the need for constant reaffirmation of masculinity. These political discourses feed male resentment, exploiting fears and insecurities to promote a supposedly strong and superior image of masculinity.

Therefore, neofascism is not only male, but it is a specific type of male who, resentful of the loss of his splendid cradle, sets his traps of revenge and hatred.

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