


From burning Judith Butler to Gilead: Michelle Bolsonaro's anti-feminist and anti-gender discourse

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As former president Jair Bolsonaro was declared ineligible to stand again, his wife, Michelle Bolsonaro, has become the far right's new possible candidate to run in Brazil's future presidential elections. In a speech at an event called by Jair Bolsonaro in February 2024, the former first lady gave a religiously motivated speech arguing for an end of the secular State. This article argues that the rapid, but not sudden, rise of evangelical fundamentalism becomes a barrier to the development of a democratic state. The discussion draws an analogy with Margaret Atwood's dystopia in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) of a totalitarian state governed by religious fundamentalism, which seems to take Bolsonaro's speech to the last level. The analysis is augmented by Judith Butler's most recent book: *Who is afraid of gender* (2024), highlighting some fundamental points around gender, feminism and democracy in light of Michelle Bolsonaro's recent political speech.

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When the series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017) premiered in Brazil in 2018, democracy in Brazil was experiencing a climate of instability. It started with the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff (the first woman to be president) and the arrest of then-former president Lula for accusations of corruption. These claims were later overturned by the Supreme Court and endorsed by the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee. Dilma's arrest prevented the candidate who led voting intentions from contesting the presidential elections. The series particularly affected Brazilians because of the political movement they were going through, in the months leading up to the election of former president Jair Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro's openly misogynistic lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT)-phobic and extremist campaign reminds of Margaret Atwood's dystopia in the book *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) that later took shape of a series on the small screen with the brilliant interpretation of the main character by Elizabeth Moss. In the TV series plot, as in the book, the United States (US) comes to be governed by a totalitarian state based on religious fundamentalism. Women completely lose their autonomy, individual freedoms are abolished and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual (LGBTQIA+) communities become openly persecuted. Violence and abuse of power are used as tools of social control. Faced with a demographic crisis, with a sharp drop in birth rates, the few fertile women left are forced to serve as 'handmaids'. This means they are sexual-reproductive slaves who live in family homes. While the book leaves us some room for the imagination, in the series, the mating ritual becomes a horrifying artistic composition. The handmaid lies on her back between the wife's legs pretending that they are one person. The wife holds the handmaid's arms, emphasising her complicity with the rape. The bird's eye shots provide viewers with a full view of the creepy spectacle, with the daunted look on the handmaid's face.

In Brazil, at the specific time, the show went on air (2017), the series presented us with a world not so far from ours. Indeed, it points to a possibility of a future for the women, in the case of an Evangelical Theocracy. In an interview with the BBC (2020), Margaret Atwood, the author of the book, named Bolsonaro as a totalitarian leader of Gilead:

People like the president of Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), who says: 'I'm a strong man and I'm going to solve this for you. You have to oppress women and minority groups and everything will be great'. (BBC 2020:n.p.)

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And concludes – ‘Gilead is no different’ (BBC 2020). The constant threat that Brazil would become a kind of Gilead has haunted many Brazilians for the 4 years of Bolsonaro’s presidency. Even after he loses the election, he continues to try to tear down the stakes of the country’s fragile democracy.

The rapid, but not sudden, rise of evangelical fundamentalism has become a barrier to the development of democratic states governed by the rule of law. The far-right mobilises disaffection against the agency of LGBTQ+ and feminists who stand for fundamental human rights. Thus, gender begins to acquire a very significant discursive dimension in the Brazilian political arena. The proliferation of Christian fundamentalist discourses has created an atmosphere very similar to Gilead, where politics is confused with religion. The purpose of this article is to highlight some fundamental points around gender, feminism and democracy in Michelle Bolsonaro’s recent political speech. From this perspective, the article will specifically problematise the paradoxical place occupied by far-right women who endorse a fundamentalist and radically anti-gender and anti-feminist discourse. The paradox consists in a discourse about women in the political sphere that urges women to return to their homes and submit to their husbands. Likewise professional women, researchers, doctors and scientists in both the series and the book *The Handmaid’s Tale* are rendered submissive and sent back to family men to portray the role designated to women. Nevertheless, the fact that the spokespeople of these anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses are women themselves causes grave discomfort. These far-right women paradoxically use the public space of politics to say that a woman’s place is at home with her husbands, that is, in the private space. This begs the question: How are we to deal with such a contradiction?

There is a vast amount of literature surrounding far-right antifeminist women, such as Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power (2002), Gabrielle Dietze and Julia Roth (2020) and Heloísa Buarque De Almeida (2023), which interrogates this dilemma head-on. At an interview with Brasil de Fato (2023), Heloísa Buarque de Almeida, professor of Anthropology and Gender at the University of São Paulo (USP) and researcher at the Center for Studies of Social Markers of Difference (Numas), states that:

[T]here is an anti-gender movement that takes the term gender and says that it is a lie, that there are only men and women ... They associate gender with the family, which can be seen in the defence of the family that always comes together with the attack on gender theory. That is why they say gender is an ideology. In fact, they are gender ideologues, but they don’t know it because they imagine women and men in a limited way. (Almeida 2023:n.p.)

From this perspective, this article engages specifically from Judith Butler’s recent book *Who’s Afraid of Feminism?* (Butler 2024) as a basis for thinking about the centrality of gender in far-right debates.

The reason for this choice is inspired by an incident that motivated Butler to write the book: The author gave a talk at

SESC Pompéia on her visit to São Paulo in 2017, where conservative evangelical anti-feminist groups gathered outside, burning an effigy with Butler’s face shouting insults against a supposed ‘gender ideology’. The emblematic image of a female author burning at the stake takes one back to the times of the Sacred Inquisition, awakening anxieties around where these movements want to go. If this does not remind one of Gilead, what does? What kind of discourse authorises this medieval practice of burning witches on a stick, even on a symbolic level?

I argue that this type of practice comes from compelling speeches that provide religious pretexts that ‘legitimise’ such acts. The following section will turn to Michelle Bolsonaro’s speech, with an analysis of some crucial points that characterise her speech as a theocratic ‘sermon’. The relevance of gender and feminism in the current Brazilian political arena will be expanded on highlighting how it is contaminated by religious and highly anti-democratic discourses. Likewise, this goes hand in hand with the political and religious tropes depicted in the series *The Handmaid’s Tale*, such as Ofglen’s trial in Episode 9 (Season 1), when the judge reads off her crimes, but instead of the law, he quotes the Romans (1:18–32), which prohibit homosexuality. The handmaid’s dress code imposed by the state includes a 19th century Quaker’s hat that blocks women’s lateral views. Quakers are Protestant Christians who live in secluded religious communities. Gilead’s policemen are called Eyes, which stand for The Eyes of God. In this regard, I will refer to Judith Butler to address anti-feminist/anti-gender rhetoric thereby drawing out the fundamental role of women in shaping democracies. From this point on, I chose to focus on the series only, as it provides a visual aid and a visual discourse. The political context the series was made and aired gives it a contemporary touch.

Michelle Bolsonaro’s speech

In a political event promoted by Jair Bolsonaro on 25 February 2024 on Avenida Paulista, São Paulo’s ‘via crucis’, Michelle Bolsonaro turns a political speech into a sermon, amid tears and dramatic exaltations (her full speech is available at PODER 360 2014). On the one hand, the speech goes full circle – beginning by thanking God and ending with euphoric shouts of ‘Glory to God’ (‘Glória a Deus’). On the other hand, it takes place at the height of a jingoistic political demonstration, full of Brazilian and some Israeli flags. The event was heavily influenced by the popular imagination of a ‘Christian Israel’, despite data published by the US Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom (Israel International Religious Freedom Report 2022), indicating that Christians represent only 1.9% of the Israeli population. In her speech, the former first lady not only mentions ‘God’ 30 times but also refers to ‘Lord’ 10 times. There are numerous religious references such as ‘mercy’, ‘hallelujah’, ‘I kneel’, ‘glory’, ‘amen’. She also quotes Psalm 24 and the biblical verse 2:5 of Zechariah and instructs protesters to say ‘Amen’ and then ‘Glory to God’. Such appeals for participation from her audience is recurrent in her speech. She thanks God saying that ‘we are only standing

because God has sustained us through your prayers'. She often highlights the 'we' when she blesses Brazil. In a way, by using 'we', she initially suggests that her message includes her audience, but at other moments in the speech, 'we the people' seems to give way to a 'we' or 'us' that is ultimately restricted to her and her husband: 'It pleased us that the Lord put us at the head of this nation', 'God has chosen us in the Presidency of the Republic' [*Aprove Deus nos colocar na Presidência da República*] [*we are*] 'used as [God's] tools to bless the people' [*... usados como instrumentos de bênção paraabençoar as pessoas*]. Her speech slides towards the idea that the Bolsonaro's are chosen by God and are therefore the legitimate rulers of Brazil. The theocratic tone oscillates between an 'us' (including Michelle) and a 'him' (just Jair Bolsonaro): 'my husband was chosen and declared that he was "God above all"' [*... Meu marido foi escolhido e declarou que era "Deus acima de todos"*], 'I strengthened myself in Christ to be at his side [Jair Bolsonaro]' [*Eu me fortaleci em Cristo para estar ao lado dele [Jair Bolsonaro]*], the slogan 'that he [Bolsonaro] used in the entire campaign and I believe that this was generated in the spiritual world' [*o slogan "que ele [Jair Bolsonaro] usou em toda campanha e eu creio que isso foi gerado no mundo espiritual"*]. She treats her consort as if he is a messenger from God, or a 'living God'. Such a speech is dangerous for democracy.

The similarities of the speech to the society depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* is striking. The country suffers a coup from a religious fundamentalist group called the 'Sons of Jacob' using the Bible as the Constitution. From the sacred book, new laws are created and applied. Just like in the series, the leaders who claim to be 'named by God' take advantage of sacred books to justify atrocities. From this perspective, can Michelle's speech present a threat to democracy and, if so, how far does it go? The speech directly challenges the constitutional principle of secularism of the State, by making a kind of 'mea culpa': 'we were negligent to the point of saying that they could not mix politics with religion' [*... Por um bom tempo fomos negligentes a ponto de dizer que não poderiam misturar política e religião*].

In an interview given to the Humanitas Institute of Unisinos, theologian Ronilso Pacheco, director of programs at Iser (Institute of Religious Studies), warns that 'the danger of Michelle's speech is to point to a theocracy, a form of government subject to the rules of a religion'. In the same article, the historian João Cezar de Castro Rocha, professor at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, highlights that:

By saying that there was a mistake in separating religion and politics, she basically meant to say that she intends to return to the 17th century, which is absolute monarchy and divine right. (Rocha 2024:n.p.)

In effect, the historian claims that Michelle Bolsonaro's performance was 'blatantly unconstitutional' and represents a true threat to the democratic rule of law. 'Evangelicals are in fact moving towards the moment when dominion theology will attempt to reach political power'.

For him, Brazilian democracy runs the risk of 'turning into a theonomist dystopia ... which intends to subordinate all life to religion' (Rocha 2024). Once again, we arrive at the dystopia confabulated by Atwood.

If we focus on the public policy goals in her speech, she only speaks in general terms, with no objectivity. On the contrary, she states that 'we are not here for a power project', suggesting that her project is of sacred nature, therefore outside of politics and of the political dispute for public power. She uses populist artifices when highlighting that she seeks 'true social justice, in the lives of those who need it most, the Brazilian people', talks about 'freeing our children from death', 'bringing food to those in need', 'protecting our widows'. She says she is engaged in a divine project of 'the liberation of Brazil'. But what does she want to free Brazil from, one may ask. She claims that she defends a Brazil 'free from corruption', 'free from inequity', but nonetheless she does not say how she intends to make this possible.

The role of women in politics as reflected in this speech is significant. When she says 'how difficult it is for women deputies, councillors, mayors to be at the forefront of politics', [*... como é difícil para deputadas, conselheiras, prefeitas estar na linha de frente da política*] (Terra 2024) and advises: 'Don't give up, women, men, young people, children' [*Não desistam, mulheres, homens, jovens, crianças*], it is curious how she puts women before men. Her speeches tend to emphasise women's place as subordinated to men. While she talks about women in politics, she delivers anti-feminist speeches. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Serena Joy is an icon of conservative women of the far-right who builds cages for women themselves, as she advocates against feminism and women's rights. Her book is called 'A Woman's Place', which gives name to the 6th episode of the first season. For Serena, a woman's place is taking care of a family home. In flashbacks of her pre-Gilead life, we see a paradox between what she defends and her active role in politics, giving out public talks and writing books. Later, the flashbacks show Serena being drawn away from her political protagonism, being ignored by the Commander, while someone tosses away a copy of her book. This scene is quite emblematic of the consequences of the ideas she defends. Her book is no longer useful to her, as she can no longer read.

At a PL Mulher event in Bahia (Terra 2024), for instance, she stated that women should be men's 'helpers'. She proclaimed that 'Our politics are feminine and not feminist' [*Nossa política é feminina, não feminista*] before also declaring her love for men – thereby implying that feminists have an aversion to men. As 'helpers' the role of women in politics would consist of 'making collaborative' and 'not competitive politics'. Finally, she warns of the need to 'strengthen the female party movement'. Her intention is 'to elect the largest number of "good women": councillors and mayors'. How can a female mayor be a 'helper'? These contradictions embodied by Michelle herself: She is a woman who takes the stage and intends to forge herself as an alternative in the next presidential elections (although not explicitly stated), but she

advises wives to help their husbands. This seem like a nod to the female electorate, but he was actually rejected by 61% of among women during his term (O Globo 2022). Given the importance space gender and feminism have acquired in *realpolitik* in recent years, the growth of anti-feminist and anti-gender rhetoric is troubling and severely challenges democracy.

It is rather tempting to make comparisons between the role played by Michelle Bolsonaro and Serena Joy, the antagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale* series. This complex character embodies this paradox: to use the voice conquered by feminists to challenge women's agency and feminism. She advocates for the submission of women to their husbands, reducing their role in politics to that of a 'helper'. Nevertheless, in Gilead women are not even allowed to be 'helpers' in the public sphere. The help is restricted to the domestic space, which is represented as a dark place, with indirect light coming in through the window from the outside. The outside is restricted for women.

The paradox is that Serena Joy was an active contributor to the construction of Gilead. Thus, in the 6th episode of the 2nd season, in a flashback of the pre-Gilead period, she is refuted by the students at the university where she would give a speech. Her ideas become reality in Gilead. The content of the speech is not revealed on stage, where she is called a 'Nazi' and prevented from speaking. It is suggested in the previous take, when she practises her speech, while being constantly interrupted and corrected by Fred, who listens to her with a frown and a condescending look (purposefully represented at a scale that makes his body seem larger than hers, filmed from a distance). In fact, Fred becomes Commander Waterford. Briefly, we hear her talk about the loss of 'values'. What 'values' are these if not conservative religious values?

In the scene, she doesn't talk about religion, but she doesn't need to. In Gilead, the character becomes fervently religious although she bends some rules when it suits her. Michelle Bolsonaro also presents herself as a spokesperson of a conservative discourse, whose ultimate goal is the construction of a theocratic state, where politics and religion go hand in hand. Interestingly, the book that Serena Joy writes before Gilead is titled '*A Woman's Place*', which is exactly what Michelle reiterates. Except in Gilead, there is no place for women in politics.

The phantom of gender and evangelical fundamentalism

Anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses have been a subject of considerable scholarship, as far as gender-related issues have been provoked in heated political debates. This, of course, includes but is not limited to issues related to feminism. In *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, Judith Butler points out how the extreme right and clerics have been constructing a phantasmatic scenario, which consists of a stratagem of 'organizing the world forged by the fear of destruction'

(Butler 2024:20) caused by gender. Gender was at the centre of Jair Bolsonaro's discourse in his election in 2018, when he started spreading fake news in his social medias about a gender kit distributed in public schools in the endeavour of deconstructing the children's genders and teaching them about the pleasures of homosexuality. The illiteracy of his voters in a gender syntax shows they cannot distinguish between sex and gender, hence making gender an empty signifier that is fed by their fears of social changes, feminism, as well as LGBT+ rights and public demonstrations of affection.

Butler observes how gender in these discursive practices assumes the organising place of anxieties and desires of the order of fantasy related to the fear of destruction (Butler 2024:19). She denounces a religious (both Roman Catholic and Evangelical) moral campaign committed to denying the existence of bodies marked by vulnerability, therefore stripping them of their rights, curtailing their basic freedoms, disavowing, demeaning, pathologising and criminalising their lives. This anti-gender and anti-feminist rhetoric is driven by an intense desire to restore the patriarchal order, thus 'fostering a desire to restore male privilege', legitimising patriarchal authority as something of the natural and religious order (Butler 2024:25).

This prism is at the heart of a political project to consolidate paternalistic authoritarian regimes. This collective dream mobilises a phantasmal organisation of how to understand the world, whose ambiguity provides a very eclectic and contradictory curation of which anxieties and fears come into play. It would not be necessary to cohere with or commit to the reality of the facts, historically or logically, but a search for elements that provide a confirmation bias.

In the series' very first episode ('Offred'), we see three men hung on the wall with white bags on their heads when Offred and Ofglen (Alex Bledel) – whose birth names are June and Emily – take the longer way home along the river. 'A priest, a doctor and a gay man' – says Ofglen. This 'treason' is informed by a collective phantasy that mobilises a phantasmal organisation of how to understand the world. This phantasy is expected to reassure them of the heteronomy. The 'gender traitor' is thus someone who rejects their gender role. They are not just 'traitors' to their gender, but 'traitors' to their nation. On episode 3, season 1 ('Late'), it is Ofglen who is accused and taken by the Eyes for 'treachery'. June is interrogated by Aunt Lydia, who wants to know what the nature of their relationship is. The Eye asks June if she knows Ofglen is involved with a Martha. She denies it but admits she knows about her being a 'gender traitor'. Later she uses a different word. She says: 'I knew she was gay' – and gets an electric shock. Aunt Lydia says: 'That word is not to be used. Do you understand me?' Then she gives her a sermon: 'That girl, that thing, was an offense to God. She was a disgusting beast'. Ofglen remains gagged through the whole trial. Her lover is also gagged. Their crime is read out, followed by their sentences, but all we see are close ups of the two 'defendants' and the terror in their eyes. They are obviously

unable to defend themselves. It is after the trial that we learn of their fates while looking at silent wide rolling shots of the lovers being escorted to the van.

When they enter the van, it is very dark. Only the side of their faces is rendered visible. They are entering a dark place. They alternate between shot/reverse shot with close ups of their faces with expressions of anguish and terror and conversation shots with the two women facing each other in the van. They speak in silence with their eyes. They hold hands and cry. We move to close ups of their hands expressing their connection and intimacy in their final moment together. Martha is quickly forced out of the van and hung in front of Ofglen, who watches the scene from the van. The eyes abruptly shut the van's door, and we can still catch a glimpse of Martha's hung body through the back window. We basically see what Ofglen sees, and yet she is visible in the scene. Later we learn she gets mutilated. This is one of the most dramatic moments of season 1, because Ofglen's agency is crushed by the state, her body is mutilated and her spirit is broken. Ofglen's life is only spared because she is fertile, otherwise she would be hung just like her lover. To Gilead, they are 'an offense to God', to put it in Aunt Lydia's words.

This portrays quite accurately what Butler means when she says:

[T]he fight against 'gender' as a demonic social construct culminates in policies that attempt to deprive people of their legal and social rights, that is, of an existence on the terms they have legitimately established for themselves. (2024:24)

The rights of these groups are put at risk 'in the name of morality, or the nation, or a patriarchal erotic dream', which in concrete terms means 'denying migrants the right to asylum', 'expelling indigenous people from their lands' and 'pushing black people into a prison system in which citizenship rights are systematically denied', so that 'both abuse and violence are justified as "legitimate" security measures' (2024:27).

In a game of inversions, oppression and violence become acts of liberation. When Michelle Bolsonaro speaks of a 'liberated Brazil' she is sending a clear message of what kind of Brazil she considers free. She means salvation, not emancipation. João Cezar de Castro Rocha explains that when Michelle says that the time for liberation has come, what she is saying is: 'the time has come for the civil State to subordinate itself to faith, not to spirituality, but to their beliefs' (Rocha 2024). When she talks about a freed Brazil, it would be a Christian Brazil, with its citizens resigned. This becomes clear when she speaks of an 'Almighty living God who is capable of restoring and healing our nation' [*Um Deus vivo todo poderoso, que é capaz de restaurar e curar a nossa nação*] 'I know that he loves me and that he chose us' [*... Eu sei que ele me ama e que ele nos escolheu*], 'Lift up, your doors, lift up your heads! Rise up, your eternal gates, and the king of Brazil will enter' [*Levantai oh portas, as suas cabeças. Levantai-vos oh entradas eternas, e entrará o rei do Brasil*]. She does not just talk about a free country, but a free country with 'restored families'.

Why would families have to be 'restored' for the country to be free? What does it mean to restore a family? Gilead represents this restoration as a violent act of reshaping the families, splitting up families of fertile women to turn them into the commandants' sex slaves. They portray the fantasy of gender roles of a patriarchal ideal past, that is, a total subordination of women in the commandant's home. Inside a family home, there is an 'Eye' of the state, such as Nick Blaine. The eyes are Gilead's secret police. Nick is responsible for making sure the family complies with Gilead's norms and gender roles. His job is casting away any threat to the family. A threat to the family is a threat to the state, as the family is the quintessential part of the state's agenda. In the non-fictional world, claims to a family become key to a conservative political agenda. For example, on 31 August 2016, when the Chamber of Deputies voted to impeach President Dilma Rousseff by 61 votes to 20 (Senado Notícias 2016), the word family appeared 136 times in the speeches of the deputies (G1 2016), especially those who claim to be conservative. What does this supposed threat to the institution of the family consist of?

Butler points out how 'gender' has become a code among Catholic and evangelical conservatives referring to an agenda that aims to destroy the traditional family in favour of a 'genderless future' (Butler 2024). She makes direct mention of Bolsonaro's Brazil, claiming that they understand that:

[G]ender calls into question the natural and normative character of heterosexuality and that, once the heterosexual order ceases to be solid, a flood of sexual perversities, including zoophilia and pedophilia will take over the face of the earth. (p. 11)

In the US, gender is also thrown into a semantic corridor of associations, related to 'paedophilia' and an 'indoctrination' that would convert boys into gays. Where and in what context would this indoctrination take place? The simple answer would be in the classroom, in sexual education classes. Thus, this internal enemy becomes the teacher who makes students aware of what sexuality and consent are, the one who helps them identify and protect themselves from abusive attitudes. By this token, gender is like a parasite that goes from school to family homes.

If gender contaminates the family through education, this crusade against gender makes education its main battlefield. Regarding this, former Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights, Damares Alves is emphatic: 'The ideological indoctrination of children and adolescents in Brazil is over', she says. 'In this government, girls will be princesses and boys will be princes' [*Neste governo, menina será princesa e menino será príncipe*] (O Globo 2019). Once again, we observe how this discourse mobilises a politics through fear and confusion, namely, through the sense of disorientation caused by a world that is changing. In an interview to BBC, Margaret Atwood claims that 'when people are afraid and feel threatened, they become conservative and willing to give up civil rights in exchange for safety' (BBC 2020). This goes beyond material safety, but safety from anything that poses a

threat to their way of living. When gender is perceived as a threat, it acquires this phantasmatic spectrum.

We turn to the dangerous phantom that Butler speaks of: 'something called gender acts on children or affects the public in harmful and destructive ways, "gender replaces a complex set of anxieties and becomes an overdetermined area in which the fear of destruction concentrates".' (2024:19). Hatred resides in the field of fears, insofar as 'hatred is fuelled and rationalized by moral righteousness, and all people harmed and destroyed by hateful movements are presented as the true agents of destruction' (2024:20).

I am interested in the possibility of a rational argumentation that sustains the fact that these movements do not seek to destroy their gender and their families. When the political debate raises the stakes to the level of destruction, rational arguments become obsolete in the face of phantasmal astonishment. Gender illiteracy produces anxieties and fears of the unknown. Moral rectitude becomes an alibi that makes LGBT phobia 'justifiable' through religion. If it is on the Bible, it is not prejudice.

Thus, in a lecture in 2014 on 'The risks faced by the Brazilian family', Damares Alves draws attention to a decree published in 2009 by the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva government related to the National Human Rights Program, which aims to 'deconstruct the heteronormativity' (G1 2019), in order to 'include in public service information systems all family configurations made up of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transvestites and transsexuals'. You see: the decree targets heteronormativity, not heterosexuality. Damares translates the decree as an attempt to destroy the Brazilian family. This narrative distortion by Damares does not seem naive to me but connected to her agenda. When she assumed her position as Minister, in 2019, Damares made the following statement: 'The State is secular, but this minister is terribly Christian' (G1 2019). There is a confluence of speeches between Damares Alves and Michelle Bolsonaro whose ultimate objective is to challenge one of the pillars of democracy, the principle of secularism of the State.

With regard to the secular State, theologian and Reverend Carlos Eduardo Brandão Calvani, postgraduate professor at the Federal University of Sergipe, raises a warning signal: 'Evangelicals have a project to take power in Brazilian society' (Calvani 2015). He points out that neo-Pentecostal groups manipulate the Holy Scriptures in a convenient way, interfering in the Human Rights Commission, with the aim of proposing or changing laws, including the immutable clauses of the Federal Constitution, such as the secular State. 'They infiltrate parties and manage to be elected to executive and legislative positions' (Calvani 2015). Calvani argues that evangelical fundamentalism constitutes 'a threat to democracy'. Gilead goes just a few miles further in this power project. The elements are there, present in Michelle Bolsonaro's speech, that challenges democracy advocating for a theocratic

state. It is possible that Michelle's speech would be better received by large crowds, as they did so, for instance, in Paulista's Avenue. But this would not be the case of most public universities, where Bolsonaro is widely refuted. The previously mentioned scene of Serena Joy's speech is in fact quite plausible. In Gilead, LGBTQ+ are deemed as 'gender-traitors' and are hanged in public places along with abortion doctors. When the handmaids walk to the market in the beginning of season 1, we see their hung bodies exposed and labelled in the back.

Aesthetically, there are similarities between Bolsonaro's circle and Gilead. Damares Alves' designated gender colours: blue for boys and pink for girls. In 'Not just a colour: pink as a gender and sexuality marker in visual communication' (2008), the linguist Veronika Koller says these colours subscribe to a gender-specific binary taxonomy. Except in Europe, until 1920 (Koller 2008:402–404; Pastoureau 2004:26–28), pink was attributed to manhood (as a shade of red, the colour of blood and chivalry), while blue was a colour associated with the purity and the iconography of the Virgin Mary. In the years that followed the end of World War I, blue became associated with the navy, male professions and masculinity.

This semantic corridor associated with colours and genders is rather arbitrary. The gender binarism is preserved, as pink became 'the new blue', representing women. This new colour code was spread through marketing, the medias and consumption. In 'Pink and blue: gendered consumerism', the linguist Shehreen Ataur Khan points out how the Nazis forced homosexual prisoners to wear pink badges in Auschwitz, because pink has already been established as a colour connected to femininity. Femininity is hence used as a means of depreciating gay men. As pink is the feminine colour, pink becomes a sign for a whole semantic archive associated with women, such as fragility, coquetry, motherhood and passivity.

According to Khan, this colour code currently impacts on how genders are categorised even before birth, informing and reiterating gender stereotypes. In using her political position as Minister of Family, Women and Human Rights to state that blue is for boys and pink for girls, Damares is precisely reassuring this gender code as a normative binary in the education of boys and girls. Thus, they fulfil gender-specific social expectations. Instead of making public policy for women who are victims of violence, for families below the line of poverty, Damares delivers a speech that confirms the far-right electors' bias, easing their fears and anxieties toward gender. As a result, she succeeded at ensuring her election as Senator. She has a very high influence in Neo-Pentecostal Evangelical circles, where gender is often demonised. She is well versed in Evangelical rhetoric, and she tells them what she assumes they want to hear. Not only does she know the right words, but she uses a preaching tone and a theatrical dramatisation that are often used in their church and in Evangelical television shows.

Just like in Damares Alves's speech, in *Gilead* colours are gendered. Colours speak volumes: the housewives wear conservative blue dresses (which are perceived as green because of the filters), Marthas wear green uniforms. Brown is for the aunts (*Gilead*'s educators), red for the handmaids and pink for the girls. In *Gilead*, colours determine how the females should be treated. They are also indexed by social class. In the series, colours indicate social roles. They are useful in situating the female characters in the power hierarchy. Just like the different colour badges in Nazi concentration camps, they are visual aids that mark the bodies of female characters in the intersection of gender and class. Except while the colour code is a social norm that cannot be bent in the fictional series, in Brazil this social norm is weaker and can be defied. Indeed, it is still a woman's choice.

The girly pink has been Michelle Bolsonaro's choice in her public appearances in the media. At least they get to be more colourful in *Gilead*. In both cases, colours are used to make a statement: there are specific colours for specific social roles. In the context of multiple screens and quick messages, pink reinforces women's submissive roles. This association of genders and colours has been perpetuated by Brazilian medias, Disney princesses, the toy industries (specially 'Barbies'), children fashion and even soap operas. These tropes have been embedded in television spectatorship by repetition. These reactionary visual and verbal statements have been appealing to a considerable electorate that feels threatened by feminism and diversity. Girls in pink and boys in blue is a simple mental scheme that feeds into the illusion that gender roles abide by conservative gender norms. This binary colour scheme gives the far-right voters a sense of security from the threat of the phantom of gender.

The anti-feminist backlash like the last roars of the Leopard

I begin with the proliferation of anti-feminist speeches on social media to seek to answer why feminism, as well as gender, causes so much uproar in far-right conservative groups.

Anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses began to acquire more impactful proportions in Brazil from 2014 onwards (De Aguiar & Pereira 2019), with the emergence of a feminist spring, of an articulation of feminist groups through social networks. It was when activists, political figures, celebrities, academics, university students, influencers and opinion makers began to play a prominent active role in social media channels, profiles and groups, popularising and taking feminism to homes (where it had not previously reached). Buzzwords such as 'rape culture', 'consent', 'sorority', 'empowerment' and even 'queer', began to circulate beyond the restricted spaces of feminist activism and the walls of academia. Furthermore, conservatives, neocons, evangelicals, Catholics, among others began to use profiles, channels, groups and pages on social networks, as well as television programmes led by pastors to launch an anti-feminist backlash (De Aguiar & Pereira 2019).

Sociology professor at the University of São Paulo, Richard Miskolci points out how topics related to gender and sexuality reached the heart of a crusade of morality of the most conservative sectors of society (Miskolci 2021). The struggles for women's rights have always been stigmatised as a supposed aversion to men, gender roles and the traditional family, but this has been updated and intensified in reaction to progressive movements that expanded their reach on media and social networks (Anjos 2017; De Aguiar & Pereira 2019). Stigmatising these social movements is a very effective way to disqualify and hence silence them. It is effective to manipulate public opinion against people who have been discredited. This makes way for the legitimization of an anti-feminist backlash.

This anti-feminist backlash is the last roars of the Leopard in Giuseppe Tomasi's classic *di Lampedusa* (2017). The Prince of Salinas roars upon realising that he is no longer the 'salt of the earth' in the face of a world that is transforming before his eyes. I make an analogy with the Sicilian classic to approach these groups who are discontent with changes over which they have little or no control, the anger arising from the impotence of the attempts' failure to reverse the wheel of history. Although these attempts end up in vain, they nevertheless manage to gather around them a broad social basis of discontents, of people who cannot or do not want to assimilate the new paradigms. The process of social transformation of paradigms is marked by lines of continuity. The ruptures are not absolute. We owe to cultural studies scholars such as Raymond Williams the notion of a present formed by residual lines of previous social formations in permanent conflict with emerging forces. I look to Raymond Williams for the keys to approaching the complexity inherent in transformation processes.

Raymond Williams' (2011) notes on cultural formations indicate how the present is imbued with residues from previous social formations. The complexity of emerging social forces and their new agendas, new meanings, practices, meanings and values are constantly produced and updated. To understand the backlash, I turn to Williams to get a sense of 'how this temporal relationship is carried out between, on the one hand, the dominant culture and, on the other, the residual or emerging culture' (Williams 2011:57). The prevalence of misogynistic elements in societal canons is not capable of stopping emerging progressive elements (feminist, queer, anti-racist, etc.), just as it is not easy to put an end to residual elements of practices, meanings and ways of life that have become obsolete. We learn from Williams (2003:6) that traditional culture comes from a continuous process of selection, interpretation and incorporation of cultural elements that connect different temporalities listed from a curation that selects between versions of the past and the formation of the present. In other words, culture is a complex structure crossed by distinct semiotic systems, in permanent tension. Gender and feminism appear as points that destabilise a constituted (and therefore dominant) universe of certainties, whose seismic shocks produce a kind of

disorientation, mental confusion, a load of frustration that generates anger and impotence.

So far, we are talking about transformation processes and their direct impacts. Confabulation occurs as these far-right groups are skilled at manipulating and playing on this anger and impotence to turn it against emerging political forces. An 'ideal past' is produced – in Butler's words – 'whose reanimation will reach, or even eliminate, sexual and gender minorities' (Butler 2024:25). From this point on, arguing becomes useless. As we move to the level of fantasy related to an idyllic past, and religious values and beliefs, there is no point in presenting evidence or suggesting readings that substantiate prerogatives in rational terms. Butler notes that 'for religious critics who claim to base their opposition to the genre on biblical grounds, the only book worth reading on the subject is the Bible itself' (2024:30). Therefore, any critical reading would mean going against the holy scriptures. This awakens a fear of contamination, an idea that it would be a sin to read at the risk of being deterred by the 'devil' of knowledge. If there is only one book worth reading, it is the Holy Bible.

By the same token, in *The Handmaids Tale*, books, are banned for women. Only men are allowed to have access to books. Ironically, Serena Joy is a writer who cannot read her own books. In the closing episode of season 2 (episode 13, 'The word'), Serena conspires with other wives and decides to make a claim in the men's council so that women could teach their children to read the Bible. She gets upstage, opens the Bible, and publicly reads to council members in the audience. The reactions are not the way she expected: the wives look in disapproval and step away, while the gentlemen turn their backs to her and leave. When she explains to Fred that she did this for their daughter, two eyes approach and take her with the Commander's consent. Her finger is amputated, which is the punishment for women who dare to read. It does not matter that it is the Bible, in spite of the Bible substituting the Constitution.

Thus, in Brazil, the Federal Constitution that underpins the democratic rule of law is discarded in these inquisitorial bonfires. Aversion to gender and feminism becomes a driving force behind attacks and setbacks to the rights acquired by these minorities. Legally, the regression was blocked by the Federal Supreme Court with the institution of the law against homophobia, framed as racism when on 13 June 2019 it began to frame LGBT-phobia in Law No. 7716/89, racism law, criminalising LGBT-phobic conduct, extending the consequences of law 7716/89, law of racism against conduct practised against LGBTs (Dos Santos 2019). But given the low compliance with the new legislation, people ask themselves 'Where do we draw the line?'

Conclusion: Building coalitions, deepening democracy

I choose to conclude this article by conjecturing alternative paths to follow towards diversity, inclusion and equity, and

in short, democratic principles that serve as a guide in the construction of public policies that aim for the common and good living. There are alternatives that would ensure that Brazil does not become Gilead. Although there are similarities between Brazil and Atwood's fictional dystopia, we have not reached this point. For Butler, there is still hope. Butler speaks of 'bringing about a world in which we can move, breathe, and love without fear of violence, with the radical and unrealistic hope of a world that is no longer governed by moral sadism disguised as morality' (2024:41). Butler understands that the way out is to build an ethical and political vision that goes in the opposite direction to the destruction and annihilation of others, through transnational coalitions capable of bringing together all the people overlooked by the politics of fear and hate.

In the opposite direction to the politics of fear and hatred is solidarity and its bonds of allegiance produced in the midst of the social struggles. Returning to the analogy of Brazil and the universe created by Atwood, protagonist Offred can only succeed in protecting herself and others by creating fictions in the rigid structure of Gilead's system. She does so by constructing 'bridges' that connect her to other characters also engaged in a project of resistance. Although she occupies the centre of the narrative, she does not act alone. In episode 9, season 1 ('The bridge'), June joins the resistance as soon as the handmaid Alma informs her about their clandestine movement called Mayday. 'I want to help' – she says promptly. She is given a task to go to the illegal brothel and find a person who is to give her a package. She later takes on more dangerous assignments. This gives her a reason to get up and fight. She is not alone. There are many of them, willing to put their lives in danger to resist. The coalitions among handmaids and Marthas is what Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga define as 'bridges'.

In *This Bridge called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), Anzaldúa and Moraga refer to coalitions as bridges that connect black women, indigenous people, Asian and Latin immigrants, Chicanas, in their complex relationships with other identity categories, such as gender, sexuality and social class. Twenty years later, when revisiting his prominent work in the preface to *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, Anzaldúa once again embraces this figuration of bridges indicating that those who fight for social transformation continue to build new bridges (Anzaldúa & Keating 2001:2). But as reality is dynamic and the context changes like waves that are never identical, it strives to adjust methods that are not working. We seek 'new ways of being and acting'. Not renovating old structures would mean completely abandoning the base on which the bridge was initially designed: 'We are reinforcing the bases and support beams of the old bridges, not just touching up the paint' (2001:4). That is to say, while they fight to open the way for new agendas and new roles in the women's movement, opening themselves, so to speak, to new bridges, it makes sense to fight so that the bridges built by other generations are not destroyed. Social transformations need to be constantly updated and never considered overdue.

Michelle Bolsonaro's backlash is just another exponent of this anti-feminist and anti-gender movement that activates a warning signal for the possibility of a setback for women, LGBTQIAP+, queers, among others, but it embarks on an anti-democratic path that leads towards an evangelical fundamentalist theocracy. Serena Joy is Michelle Bolsonaro's caricature, her shadow. Except Michelle is still pre-Gilead. Had she been in Gilead, she would have had to step away from politics and face the consequences of her speech. Serena helps to build Gilead, and this does not prevent her from being silenced, rendered invisible and having her body mutilated as a punishment for reading. The theocracies that they support have no space for women. If women are excluded from the political sphere, it is no longer a democracy. In fact, democracy cannot exclude more than half of the humanity. From this perspective, therefore, feminism is indispensable to democracy. A survey by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU 2022) conducted in 2021 shows that the global average of women's political participation in national parliaments is 26.1%. If there is an underrepresentation of women in politics worldwide, it is also possible to affirm that women are fundamental to thinking about democracy. There are even campaigns by the Liberal Party (PL), Michelle Bolsonaro's party, inviting women to join and run in the next elections. However, women in positions of power are insufficient for democracy to take women's interests into account. But if it is to be 'feminine, but not feminist', encouraging women to submit to their husbands, there will not be a qualitative leap towards ensuring and expanding women's rights and well-being. Powerful female characters such as in the series *The Handmaid's Tale*, like June (Offred) and Emily (Ofglen) – my switching back to their original names is intentional – can represent past, present and future struggles that women are going through. We cannot take for granted the pathways that women of other generations have opened for us.

The rise of an anti-gender and anti-feminist far-right has shown us that progress can possibly revert, and we must stay alert. Nevertheless, it is impossible to go back in time. The idyllic past that these exponents of the far-right seek only exists in their imagination. They would know this had they paid more attention to history classes. I agree with Butler that history is complex, and genders do not exist outside this temporal complexity. When someone gets attached to one monolithic definition of what a man or a woman is, history defeats these projects because of the complex configuration of gender and ways of being. These last roars of anachronistic Leopards are impotent in the face of a culture that is dynamic and changes over time. The long history may show that they scream loudly in despair because they are gradually becoming residual.

On the other hand, polarisation, political instability and recent wars empower the far-right and their discourses of fear of destruction. The far-right manipulates and controls people by feeding into fears of 'existential futures' – in Butler's words (2024:16) – by politically capitalising their

fears and anxieties of different spheres, such as economic, ecologic and social. Thus, gender becomes this empty signifier, captured by a semantic corridor haunted by phantoms. Sometimes, it seems impossible to convince them that they are not real. But how many times June tries to escape before she brings Nicole to safety? To impede this setback, I suggest we learn from our failures and keep on trying to build new bridges, brick by brick.

'Don't let the bastards grind you down!'

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