

Culture War and Education: Ultraconservatives and Neoliberals Against Public Universities in Brazil

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Abstract

The article analyzed the damages of the ultraconservative culture war to public education in Brazil, specifically in higher education. The main objective was understanding how the culture war aligns with the neoliberal agenda to dismantle public and free universities. The inquiry analyzed the strategies of the ultraconservatives to gain political power and the peculiarities of the culture war in Brazil. The research methodology was an empirical analysis (2004 to 2022) based on the Google Trends tool to map the Google searches for keywords used by ultraconservatives in their attacks on public universities, search on websites (2018 to 2022) of cases of violence against scholars due to the content of their research; bibliographic research on the strengthening of the ultraconservatives in Brazilian politics; and critical analysis of the neoliberal reforms implemented after the 2016 judicial-parliamentary coup. The article concludes that both neoliberals and ultraconservatives attack public education. On the one hand, the neoliberals establish the

economic bases for the precariousness of public universities; on the other hand, the ultraconservatives promote the demoralization of scientific institutions and block lines of inquiry. Thus, the culture war plays a fundamental role in the current phase of the class struggle. It delegitimizes critical thinking, encourages violence, and threatens the secular and democratic State.

Keywords: *Culture War, Ultraconservatism, Public Education, Democracy, Class Struggle*

Introduction

In Brazil, the 2016 judicial-parliamentary coup ended the thirteen-year rule of the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores - PT) in the federal government, and it paved the way for the most conservative portions of society to gain power. The neoliberal project of dismantling public universities increased by attacks with a moral content that legitimizes the destruction of the university's public character, the flow of public budget to educational corporations, and encourages control over the content of research and academic activities, and persecution of scholars and students (Accioly, Nascimento and Costa, 2022). In Brazil, public universities are financed exclusively by public budgets, which is a defense of teachers' unions to ensure autonomy about market interests. The Federal Constitution assures the university's autonomy, meaning didactic and administrative autonomy encompassing financial and property management, hiring teachers, election of rectors, and democratic decision-making processes. While the PT government made contributions, it was controversial (Accioly, Gawryszewski and Nascimento, 2016; Accioly, 2020). Some progress was made in democratizing access to higher education, with a significant increase in enrollment of low-income students and students of color. However, while public

universities expanded, the government applied most of the budget to higher education corporations.

Contradictions marked the governments under PT leadership since the party was in power supported by a coalition of social groups whose leaders were implicated in a sequence of corruption scandals (Accioly, 2021). Mass media politically exploited the scandals to decrease the government's legitimacy among popular classes and spread hate against the PT leadership. 'Fighting corruption' has become the symbol of the judiciary aligned with the elite's interests of banning PT from power.

Brazilian society turned deeply polarized. The spread of hate speeches and fake news against PT leadership on social media and mobile apps shaped the 2018 presidential elections. It highlighted the racist, homophobic, slaveholder, and landlord roots of the Brazilian social formation, whose educational effects are the high illiteracy rate among the black population and the profound racial inequality in access to education at all levels, especially in higher education (IBGE, 2023). The far-right candidate Bolsonaro was elected President in 2018 using anti-human-rights speech. To illustrate this, before the elections, Bolsonaro was photographed wearing a shirt that read “Human rights, the dung of vagabondage”¹. In Brazil, conservatives associate defending human rights with defending criminals. In this mindset, criminals are indefensible subhumans who should be exterminated. As the academic environment, in general, affirms democratic and humanist values, Bolsonaro's behavior fueled intense social tensions and violence against public university students, university professors, and scholars. Also, it opened the doors to the neoliberal agenda of reforms that also attack the rights of the working class.

Considering this context, the research aimed to understand how the ultraconservative culture war aligns with the neoliberal agenda to dismantle

public universities, that in Brazil are autonomous and tuition-free. Thus, the article reflects on the strategies of the ultraconservatives (which bring together religious groups, military, business people, and fascist organizations) to gain political power and the peculiarity of the culture war in Brazil.

We understand that the culture war not only occurs in speech but also stimulates concrete actions to attack social rights and eliminate everything that is identified as being progressive: the rights of women, LGBTQI+, indigenous communities, environmentalism, in short, human and socio-environmental rights. As McCrudden (2015) states, the legislative dispute made by the ultraconservatives seeks to redefine human rights for a religion-friendly interpretation that in reality denies the rights of minorities.

In order to understand the discursive strategies – which encourage actions – of the Brazilian culture war and its political dynamics, the research methodology was: an empirical analysis (2004 to 2022) based on the Google Trends tool to map the Google searches for keywords used by ultraconservatives in their attacks on public universities; search on websites (2018 to 2022) of cases of violence against scholars due to the content of their research; bibliographic research on the strengthening of the ultraconservatives in Brazilian politics; and critical analysis of the neoliberal reforms implemented after the 2016 coup that impact public universities.

The research concludes that the conservative culture war aligns with the neoliberal interests to dismantle and privatize public education. Some examples are their defense of homeschooling – which is prohibited in Brazil – under the control of religious groups or school choice policies (such as vouchers) to benefit private institutions. The alignment of the ultra-conservatism with the neoliberal agenda consolidates a religious ideology of war between "good" and "evil" (the ultraconservatives and the others) that echoes among the working

class, creating new forms of persecution of critical thinking and stimulating violence against unions and social movements.

The Brazilian Culture War

In the United States, a reference for understanding the culture war was the speech by conservative Pat Buchanan, in 1992, at the Republican Party convention. Buchanan tried to run for the presidency of the United States, but he was defeated in the party's primary elections which endorsed the candidacy of George Bush (Rocha, 2021). Buchanan's speech points out some elements of the culture war:

There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America. (...) The agenda that Clinton & Clinton would impose on America – abortion on demand, a litmus test for the Supreme Court, homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, women in combat units – that's change, all right. But it is not the kind of change America needs. It is not the kind of change America wants. And it is not the kind of change we can abide in a nation that we still call God's country. (...) America's great middle class has got to start standing up to these environmental extremists who put birds and rats and insects ahead of families, workers, and jobs. (...) we stand with him against the amoral idea that gay and lesbian couples should have the same standing in law as married men and women (Buchanan, 1992).

Buchanan's culture war ideology came to power in the United States after the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and again in 2025. Political agendas against immigrants, abortion, women's rights, Afro-descendants, and LGBTQI+ people have gained echo. Openly anti-scientific positions and attacks on scholars were spread, which motivated the American Educational Research Association (AERA) to publish an open letter, in February 2022, with denunciations of the curtailment of teaching work in the United States:

Courses are being removed from the curriculum or threatened with removal; those engaged in teaching or undertaking research on such topics as racism, critical race theory, or gender identity are being scrutinized or chilled from pursuing those lines of inquiry, whether directly by their institutions or more broadly by the pressures exerted on their institutions. While some of the most egregious suppression is directed to social issues, many other areas (e.g., pressure to destroy COVID research data) have experienced suppression effects as well (AERA, 2022)

In Brazil, in April 2021, the journal 'Science' published an article denouncing the increasing attacks and threats suffered by scientists under the Bolsonaro government (Herton, 2021). Bolsonaro's culture war in Brazil is related to the global rise of the far-right. The main arguments are: against abortion, criticism of the Supreme Court; the attack on LGBTQI+ rights; denunciation of alleged persecution of Christian religions; attacks on environmentalists; the motto 'God, Family, Country.'

However, it is possible to identify peculiar traits in Brazil (Rocha, 2021).

Throughout the 1980s, Brazil was the scene of great political effervescence with the resumption of the streets by social movements, which had been suffering violent repression by the military dictatorship (1964-1985). With the fall of the dictatorship, a new Brazilian Constitution was enacted (the Federal Constitution of 1988), establishing social rights, ensuring the public budget for educational policies, and didactic-scientific and administrative autonomy of universities.

Nevertheless, the Federal Constitution of 1988 suffered harsh criticism from neoliberals, who understood that the government would be doomed to bankruptcy if it provided well-being to people experiencing poverty. Thus, the austerity measures would serve as a "virtuous pain after the immoral party" (Blyth, 2017: 36). The term austerity brings the figure of the State closer to that of an individual to exalt behaviors such as discipline, prudence, and sobriety

(Rossi, Oliveira, Arantes, and Dweck, 2019) and associate investments in social policies with immoral and irresponsible behavior. It is a constructed rhetoric that associates the struggle for rights with laziness.

The social rights assured in the constitution were taken as threats to the profits of the rentiers and the political interests of conservative groups opposed to the secular State (Sierra, Veloso, and Zacarias, 2020). Over the 1990s, several neoliberal reforms limited social rights.

The end of the military dictatorship did not eliminate "right-wing" thinking, on the contrary. However, immediately after the fall of the regime and due to its association with negative images of violent authoritarianism, there were almost no parliamentarians who identified themselves as "right-wing", a phenomenon popularly called "embarrassed right-wing" (Quadros and Madeira, 2018). After more than a decade of PT governments - and a generation of young leaders who did not experience the hard times of the dictatorship - the conservative reaction to "progressive" and "subversive" agendas intensified. Thus, the conservatives in the National Congress created the "evangelical coalition" to defend their interests. On the one hand, they sought to ensure the preservation of doctrinal interests related to morality and customs, such as the prohibition of abortion and civil unions between homosexuals; on the other hand, they sought to meet the operational needs of evangelical churches, such as concessions for communication broadcasters (which proved crucial for religious propaganda) and tax exemptions (Quadros and Madeira, 2018). The evangelical coalition became stronger by associating itself with the "agribusiness coalition" and the "bullet coalition" (military and police officers who defend the armament of the population, intensification of criminal law, and increased repression of crime).

In addition to evangelical groups, the overthrow of the military dictatorship in the late 1980s also caused apprehension among the military that tortured

activists (Rocha, 2021). The confidential documents that circulated in the army spread ideas that the democratic regime would be one of total permissiveness and that the communists were acting to seize power, no longer through the strategy of armed struggle but the manipulation of public opinion, the domain of cultural institutions and education (Pedretti, 2021). They called these strategies *Marxismo Cultural* (Cultural Marxism) and *Gramscismo* (Gramscism, related to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci). These ideas became public and gained new followers in the 2000s due to the activism of Olavo de Carvalho, an anti-communist ideologue in the Bolsonaro government who had close relations with Steve Bannon (Teitelbaum, 2020). Their criticisms of the so-called cultural Marxism and Gramscism are not grounded in reading and researching the works of Marx and Gramsci. On the contrary, their arguments rely on an uncritical aversion to communism and everything they identify with being leftist.

When analyzing Olavo de Carvalho's books and posts on social media, Rocha (2021) identified that the culture war is anchored not only in exhaustively repeated content but fundamentally in a form that is updated according to the context. It appropriates religious discourse and spreads a conception of Christianity that understands reality as a struggle of "good" against "evil" – in which "good" is the patriarchal, Christian white supremacist family, and "evil" represents everything that moves away from it, such as anti-racist, feminist, LGBTQI+, and human rights movements.

The ultraconservatives gained power by manipulating the social dissatisfaction with the failure of the state in providing social policies, fomenting moral panic, and inciting hatred towards the left and minorities, considered guilty of the crisis that they understand as being a moral crisis. A vital point of the culture war strategies is to mobilize strong feelings. The internet and social media play a fundamental role since they enable the fast circulation of ideas, which is

favorable for creating ultraconservative "common sense" (Gramsci, 1999) among the working class.

According to Marx and Engels (1993), the ideas of the dominant class are in each epoch, the dominant ideas, that is to say the class which has at its disposal the means of material production has at the same time the means of spiritual production. In this vein, Gramsci comprehends "common sense" as an uncritically understanding of the world, the immediate product of the sensations, a perception based only on the appearances of the facts (Gramsci, 1999). For this author, all people form in their everyday life a "spontaneous philosophy," that is, a worldview that, most of the time, lacks self-awareness, and for this reason ultimately reproduces the ideas of the ruling class. Gramsci does not see the spontaneity of this "philosophy" formed in everyday life as an expression of individuals' intellectual and moral autonomy but rather as a result of a passive relationship with the world. The fundamental characteristic of common sense is that it is a disaggregated, incoherent conception of the world that plays a fundamental role in the class struggle.

When the conception of the world is not critical and coherent but occasional and disaggregated, we belong simultaneously to a multiplicity of mass men; our personality is composite, in a bizarre way: in it are found elements of cavemen and principles of the most modern and progressive Science, prejudices of all past historical phases that are narrowly localistic and intuitions of a future philosophy that will be proper to the globally unified human race. To criticize one's conception of the world, therefore, means to make it unitary and coherent and to raise it to the point reached by the most evolved world thought. It also means, therefore, to criticize all the philosophy that has existed to date, insofar as it has left consolidated stratifications in popular philosophy. (Gramsci, 1999, p.94, our translation).

The rapid circulation of ideas on the internet strongly contributes to a disaggregated conception of the world due to the lack of time to criticize the

information. At the same time, the information circulating on the internet is subject to the filters of large corporations, such as the google filter that prevents users from finding information that is radically outside their universe (Pariser, 2012). At this point, Marx's critique of machinery in the 19th Century is still relevant because he highlighted the ruling class's control over technology and analyzed how it is used against the workers:

Machinery, considered in itself, shortens working time, while, in capitalist use, it increases the working day; in itself, it facilitates work, while, in capitalist use, it increases its intensity; of itself it is a victory of man over the forces of nature, while, capitalistically used, it subjugates man through the forces of nature; of itself it increases the wealth of the producer, while, capitalistically used, it impoverishes him (Marx 1867/2013, p. 513, our translation).

Technology and the internet are not neutral grounds; therefore, large corporations use their economic power to spread a “common sense” (Gramsci, 1999) favorable to them. Thus, the internet became a fertile ground for the neoliberal and ultraconservative common sense, which, being an incoherent conception of the world, encourages a large part of the working class to be active in the culture war that concretely dismantles their social rights by dismantling (financially, morally, and administratively) public institutions, especially public universities, a project that is part of the neoliberal agenda.

Analysis of Google searches for keywords related to the ultraconservatives

To understand the strategies of the ultraconservatives to gain power by attacking critical thinking and public universities, we used the google trends tool for monitoring/systematizing searches from 2004 to 2022.

We did a bibliographic analysis of authors that mapped the vocabulary used by leading Brazilian conservative personalities when attacking professors,

researchers, and public universities (Penna, 2015; Pedretti, 2021; Rocha, 2021). We selected four keywords in Portuguese: *Marxismo Cultural* (Cultural Marxism), *Esquerdistas* (Leftists); *Gramscismo* (Gramscism, related to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci); *Ideologia de Gênero* (Gender Ideology).

Unlike *Marxismo Cultural*, *Gramscismo* and *Esquerdistas* are terms used solely in a derogatory sense, having been invented and spread by conservatives to attack critical thinking. These terms were cited in the 1980s reports of the *Centro de Informações do Exército* (Army Information Center) that were intended to challenge allegations that the military committed human rights violations under the military dictatorship (1964-1985). One report stated the following:

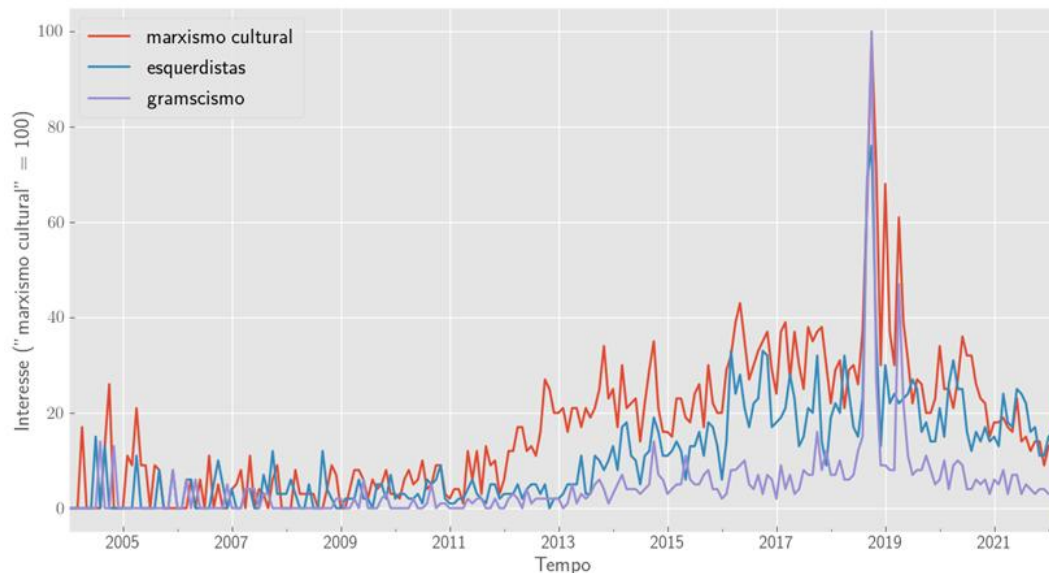
Inspired and influenced during their stay abroad by the thoughts of the Italian ideologist Antonio Gramsci, considered the greatest theoretician of Marxism after Lenin, [the subversive leaders] began to seek the domination of cultural institutions and education. They thus intended to create a social counter-hegemony, enabling the transformations that allowed them to conquer power and change the prevailing structure (Pedretti, 2021, p.3).

The term *Ideologia de Gênero*, also an invention of conservatives spread vigorously through the actions of the *Escola Sem Partido* (School without Party) movement created in 2004. For them, since the end of the military dictatorship in Brazil, leftist teachers are indoctrinating students, and schools are spreading an anti-family ideology in an attempt to turn young people into gays and lesbians (Penna, 2017).

We organized the data in Figure 1 according to the volume of searches for the keywords *Marxismo Cultural*; *Esquerdistas*; *Gramscismo*. From 2004 to 2022, the keyword with the highest peak was *Gramscismo*, in October 2018, during the presidential elections. This keyword was recurring in Olavo de Carvalho's

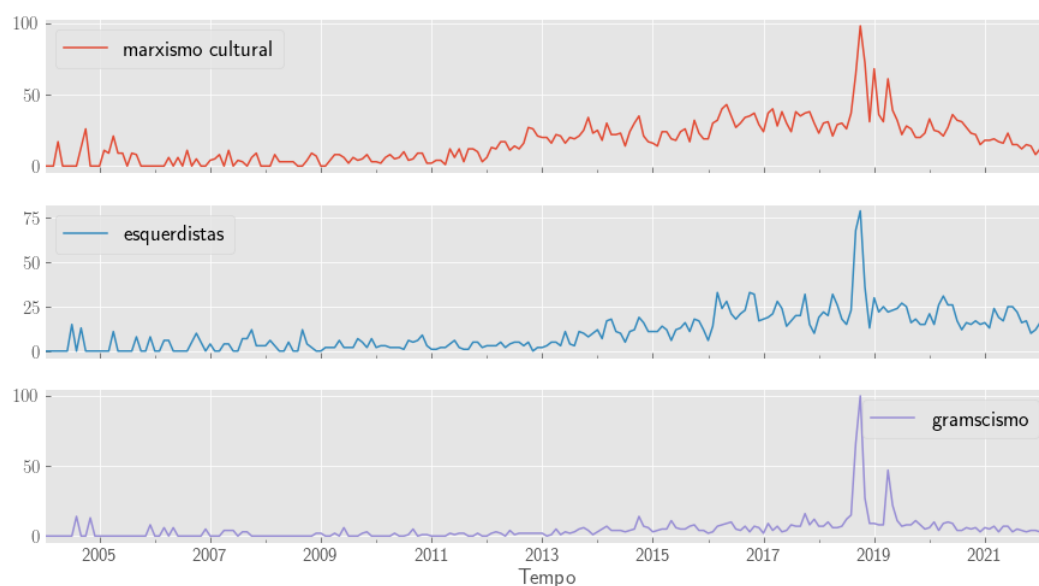
posts on social media. Olavo de Carvalho was an anti-communist ideologue in the Bolsonaro government who had close relations with Steve Bannon (Teitelbaum, 2020), who in turn served as the White House's chief strategist in the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump. In Figure 1, index 100 represents the peak of popularity of the most searched keyword on Google (*Gramscismo*).

Figure 1 - Interest index by aggregated keywords. Created by the authors based on the Google Trends tool



The three keywords (figure 1) peaked in October 2018: *Gramscismo* equal to 100, *Marxismo Cultural* equal to 98, and *Esquerdistas* equal to 76. Even though *Gramscismo* is the keyword with the highest peak of interest, *Marxismo Cultural* and *Esquerdistas* had the highest volume (figure 2).

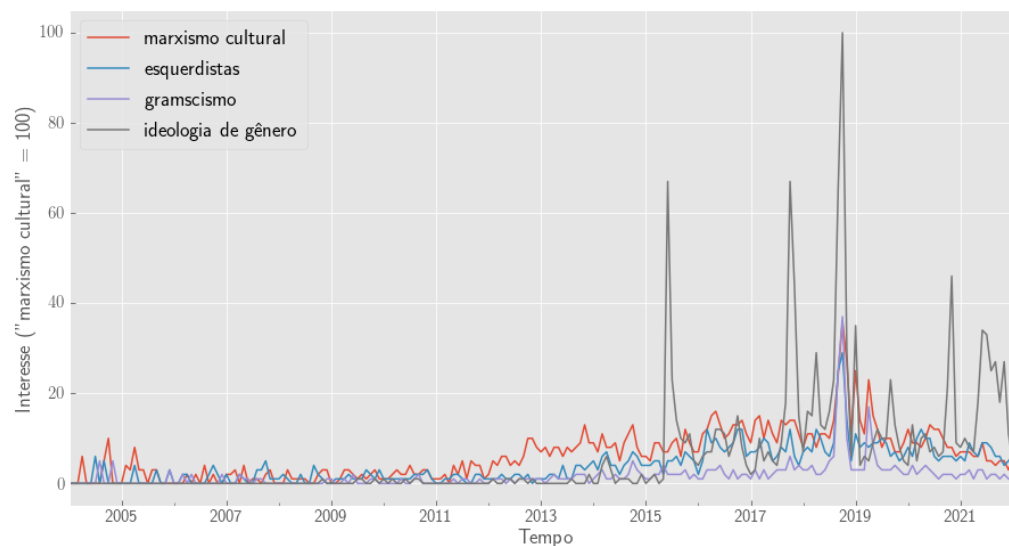
Figure 2 - Interest rate for each keyword. Created by the authors based on the Google Trends tool



The analysis shows that, despite the peak being in 2018, the interest in the keywords grew from 2013 onwards (figure 1). It may be related to the wave of protests that took to the streets in June 2013, and spread the conservative discourse of fighting corruption and immoralities (Pinto, 2017). The increase in searches can also be related to fake social media accounts spreading fake news that fuels hatred against the left (Gragnani, 2017).

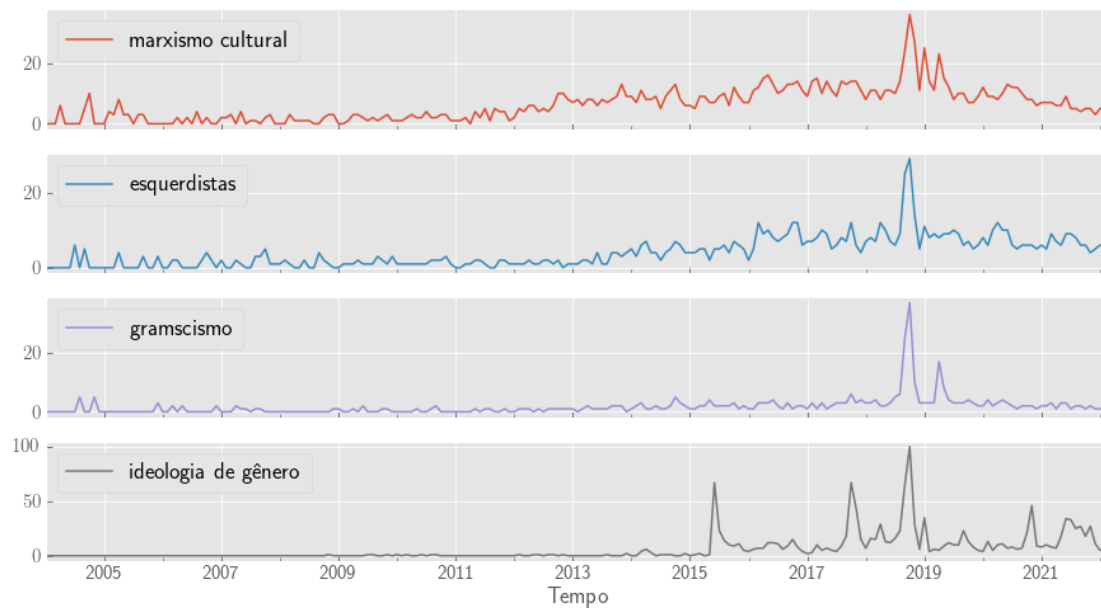
To complement the analysis of the popularity of the keywords related to attacks on critical thinking, we investigated a keyword related to the conservative's attempts to control body and sexuality (figure 3): *Ideologia de Gênero* (Gender Ideology). Bolsonaro and his supporters use this keyword to attack LGBTQI+ and feminist movements and encourage the persecution of teachers.

Figure 3 - Interest index by aggregated keyword. Created by the authors based on the Google Trends tool



We noticed that the keyword *Ideologia de Gênero* has different peaks over the period (figure 3). The peaks of 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2020 (figure 4) may be related to the period of public debate and implementation of the high school curriculum reform, whose proposal was criticized by the conservatives for including discussions on gender and sexuality in schools. They won the dispute in the National Congress, and the final version of the national curriculum does not have any debate on gender.

Figure 4 - Interest rate for each keyword. Created by the authors based on the Google Trends tool



The analysis of the growth, from 2013 onwards, of the search for keywords related to the ultraconservatives highlighted elements of the recent Brazilian culture war. In 2013, street protests took over the country. The demonstrations started motivated by the discontent over public transport prices and then spread as a right-wing movement against the Workers' Party government. In the turmoil that began in 2013, the public discourse against the left and progressives gained prominence.

Neoliberals and Ultraconservatives Against Public Universities

In the 1990s, the neoliberal agenda of privatization, economic liberalization, and cutting spending on social policies were opposed in Brazil by intense social struggles and strikes (DIEESE, 2019). In response, Lula da Silva (a former unionist) was elected in 2003, through arrangements between the Workers' Party and big capital institutions. The Workers' Party governments implemented the economic model of "neoliberal developmentalism" with income distribution policies, policies to combat gender violence, and affirmative policies for increasing university enrollments.

Shortly after the 2016 judicial-parliamentary coup, the interim government pushed for several reforms to dismantle social rights. In 2016, the National Congress passed a constitutional amendment that established an economic regime that pushed harsh limits on spending on social policies, and as a result limited the federal education budget. In 2017, congress passed the labor law reform, which dismantles labor rights, institutionalizes non-standard forms of employment, and abruptly weakens union funding. In 2019, after the inauguration of Bolsonaro as President, the constitutional amendment of the public social security system reform was enacted, limiting the right to retirement benefits. In less than two years, Brazil turned to ultra-neoliberal barbarism associated with neo-fascism (Behring, 2021). As in the 1990s, teachers protested and marched against the reforms (Accioly and Lamosa, 2021).

Both neoliberal and ultraconservatives accuse public servants, such as school teachers and university professors, of being part of a privileged class that collapses the public budget. According to Leher (2021), the argument that the collapse of the public budget is due to spending on paying civil servants is a fallacy, as the percentage of workers in Brazil who work in the public sector as a percentage of the population is below the OECD average and this spending has been falling over the last two decades.

On the one hand, the neoliberals establish the economic bases for the precariousness of public universities. On the other hand, the ultraconservatives promote the demoralization of universities and scientific institutions, accusing them of indoctrinating students through what they call 'gender ideology,' 'cultural Marxism,' and 'Gramscism'. In reality, to the extent that it links the conception of freedom to the logic of competition and the free market, the neoliberal worldview spreads a common sense that leads to the most irrational forms of sociability, a fertile ground for the spread of belligerent obscurantism.

According to the organization Scholars at Risk (SAR), between 2017 and 2020, about 41 Brazilian scholars sought support to leave the country because of threats (Scholars at Risk, 2021). In the 2018 presidential elections, the mood was one of war against public universities' students and professors. Some examples are (Scholars at Risk, 2019): A black female student was raped after suffering threats from Bolsonaro's supporters, who were claiming they would "cleanse the university" when Bolsonaro took office. Students were attacked near a University campus for campaigning for the opposition candidate, police inspected several universities, interrogated professors, and confiscated leaflets with a manifesto in defense of democracy and public universities. Furthermore, a court ordered to remove from a university campus a banner written: "Law students against fascism", a court ordered the university administration to remove posters honoring Marielle Franco, a black and LGBT councilwoman murdered in March 2018. In addition, a judge ordered the cancellation of a lecture on fascism, a judge ordered the withdrawal of a statement posted on a university's website and signed by the dean, which extolled democratic principles and rejected violence in elections. Those episodes show that Bolsonaro's supporters in the judiciary recognize and defend his fascist bias.

After Bolsonaro took office, Education Minister Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez (who remained in office for only three months) stated that "the idea of a university for all does not exist" and that "universities must be exclusive for an intellectual elite" (Passarelli, 2019).

Between 2019 and 2020, Abraham Weintraub held the position of Minister of Education, and he intensified the attacks by stating (without presenting evidence) that universities are places of mess and "naked people" (Veja, 2019), illegal marijuana plantations and that chemistry laboratories would be developing illicit drugs. Because of that accusation, in 2021, Weintraub was

ordered to pay compensation for collective moral damages to teachers (Pimentel, 2021).

In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities suspended in-person activities and held public events using online platforms, which exacerbated control over teaching and the scale of ideological attacks.

Throughout 2020, there were several episodes of cyber-attacks on online platforms. Some examples are (Andes, 2020): in the presentation of a monograph on "Hate speech and the criminalization of homotransphobia"; in a lecture on "Health and Nutrition for the Black Population"; in a debate about Blackness; at an event organized by a student movement; in a videoconference on the History of Africa; in a discussion on "Sexual and Reproductive Health, Motherhood, and Race." In 2021, a former dean and some professors were criminally investigated for criticizing Bolsonaro on social media (Scholars at Risk, 2021).

Those cyber-attacks have in common the exhibition of pornography, violence, and the exaltation of Bolsonaro. In short, the racist, misogynist, homophobic, and neo-Nazi face of the culture war.

Conclusions

The research on keywords and cyber-attacks on universities made it possible to understand the relevance of social media and online platforms to spreading neoliberal and ultraconservative ideas to encourage a large part of the working class to be active in the culture war that concretely dismantles social rights.

The culture war plays a fundamental role in the current phase of the class struggle. It delegitimizes critical thinking, encourages violence, and threatens the secular and democratic states. In Brazil, due to the recent past of dictatorship, democratic institutions are pretty fragile.

Both neoliberals and ultraconservatives attack public education. The neoliberal agenda financially strangles universities, and the ultraconservative culture war violently blocks lines of inquiry. Thus, the culture war aligns with the neoliberal interests to dismantle and privatize higher education.

In conclusion, the attacks on public universities cause irreversible damage, as they impact present and future generations and hinder the development of science on a national base. Thus, protecting public universities means defending future possibilities of constructing a less unequal and more democratic society.

Notes

¹ https://www.facebook.com/cbolsonaro/posts/1439165939465514?ref=embed_post

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