Political tragedies:
An issue of communication[a]

Tragédias políticas:
Um problema da comunicação

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ABSTRACT
The inability of public organs, monitoring institutions, and social agents to address the issue of fake news demands answers from scholars. Such complexity increases as it involves international agents, foreign governments and offices, equipment, and machines to produce and overload information systems that are funded by donations and millionaire transactions, greatly exceeding the capacity of governments to offer effective measures against this ill-intentioned use of democracy. However, we are not deterred from accepting the challenge. After years of investigation and debates on ideas, we might arrive at propositions that can revert this process and guarantee the recovery of trust in democracy and in decision-making processes for all.
Keywords: truth; trustworthy information; disinformation; journalism; democracy

RESUMO
Até o momento, órgãos públicos, instituições de controle e agentes sociais não sabem como lidar com a questão das notícias falsas e cobram soluções dos estudiosos. A complexidade se torna ainda maior pelo fato de envolver não apenas agentes internacionais e governos do exterior, mas escritórios, equipamentos e máquinas de produção e bombardeamento de informações, assentados sobre doações e verbas milionárias, que transcendem em muito a capacidade de governos apresentarem medidas efetivas contra esse mau uso da democracia. Mas isso não nos impede de aceitar o desafio. Após anos de debates, investigações e confronto de ideias, quiçá possamos chegar a proposições que tenham condição de reverter o processo e garantir a todos a recuperação da confiança na democracia e nos processos de tomada de decisão.
Palavras-chave: Verdade, informação confiável, desinformação, jornalismo, democracia

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THE DISCUSSION ABOUT actual and fake news necessarily refers to a philosophical debate that questions people's real interest in preserving the truth in the face of counterfeits of reality. This goes back to Nietzsche, who wondered whether we, in our everyday life, business, and decisions in fact prefer truth over convenient information:

> The understanding of nihilism in its essence requires that one act in favor of a lie that is useful to life, that one stands in defense of illusion insofar as it stimulates the will to creative power . . . If nihilism is the fanaticism of the Absolute, nihilism is overcome by this provocation of "nothing is true, everything is permitted" (Granier, 2000, p. 1259; free translation).

This statement has never been more relevant than today, when political decisions that affect millions of people are subject to various manipulations and in which the biggest victim of this process, besides truth itself, is the political bet and the hope of these same people.

Nietzsche questions whether we can truly endure the truth. In the preface to *Ecce Homo*, he wonders "how much truth does a spirit endure, how much does it *dare*?" He apparently thinks we are afraid or apprehensive of the truth. Adorno and Horkheimaer follow the same path:

> . . . if Adorno and Horkheimer begin the question of the submission of the individual to the mass from fear or dread of the truth, they question an individual who, from within, refuses to be critically distanced, perhaps because he feels or knows the "weight" of the truth. In other words, he does not distance himself so nothing will happen or so he will lose nothing. But, here, it is appropriate to invert the statement to ask whether, after all, by not distancing themselves, would the individual gain something? (Ramos, 1999, p. 6; free translation)

Indeed, Nietzsche believed that people ruin themselves when confronted with the truth.

> It might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish, in which case the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the "truth" one could still barely endure—or to put it more clearly, to what degree one would require it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified. (Nietzsche, 1988b, p. 29; free translation)

In fact, people prefer to sweeten it, to distort it according to their interests, fears, and afflictions but they paradoxically shun the desire to be deceived. Man, says Nietzsche in *Aurora*, does not want to be deceived (Nietzsche, 1988a).

But at what point did this flight in the face of so-called true facts devastate the human species? Was it always like this or did a specific episode bear it into fruition? For Nietzsche, this is directly linked to his thesis of the "death of God."

"God is dead" translates this sudden realization that the Christian faith has lost its foundation and that our whole system of values is unbalanced. It is also possible to guess that the horrors of the last half century reflect the morbid anxiety that corrodes the modern soul and the fanatical desire to escape from this affliction by imposing, by force of arms or ideological constraint, a new system of values capable of giving meaning again to human existence. (Granier, 2000, p. 1255; free translation)

Jean Granier associates furious agitation with this senselessness that afflicts humans in the face of the crisis of Christianity and its lack of responses.

Man, faced with this emptiness, would not be tempted . . . to deify himself by a suicide of provocation and blasphemy? Or yet, he would not rush into furious agitation, such as he rallies around a so-called Great Idea . . . the members of the Parallel Action and their animator Diotima, in Robert Musil's novel, The Man Without Qualitites? Wouldn't the moral stake be a precious narcotic to disguise the starvation of a deserted world by the divine? (Granier, 2000, p. 1257; free translation)

Yes, idealistic chimeras come precisely to console human impotence. "Nihilism is the 'ideology,' or even 'the morality' of this kind of men who need idealistic chimeras to console themselves for their impotence in managing the becoming, the contradictions, the pain inherent in pure reality" (Granier, 2000, p. 1258; free translation).

But why would Christianity beget disappointment? Granier (2000) claims, regarding idealist speculation, that "if it triumphed historically with Christianity, 'this Platonism for the people' never completely bridged the fissure between the real and this being-in-itself, ready for all perfections" (p. 1257; free translation).

We have, then, the "world deserted by the divine" at the basis of modern nihilism, which is characterized, according to Nietzsche, by wanting nothing instead of wanting nothing.

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The meaninglessness of suffering, *not* suffering, was the curse that has so far blanketed mankind, – and *the ascetic ideal offered man a meaning*! . . . Within it, suffering was interpreted; the enormous emptiness seemed filled; the door was shut on all suicidal nihilism. This interpretation – without a doubt – brought new suffering with it, deeper, more internal, more poisonous suffering, suffering that gnawed away more intensely at life: it brought all suffering within the perspective of *guilt* . . . But in spite of all that – man was *saved*, he had a *meaning*, from now on he was no longer like a leaf in the breeze, a plaything of absurd, of the 'non-sense'; from now on he could *will* something, – no matter what, why and how he did it at first, the *will itself was saved*. It is absolutely impossible for us to conceal what was actually expressed by that shole willing that derives its direction from ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more of the animalistic, even more of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from all appearance, transience, growth, death, wishing, longing itself – all that means, let us dare to grasp it, a *will to nothingness*, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental prerequisites of life, but it is and remains a *will*! . . . And, to conclude by saying what I said at the beginning: man still prefers to *will nothingness* than *not* will . . . (Nietzsche, 1995, p. 185-186)

Well, the recovery of the "meaning of life" would come, according to Nietzsche, with this will to anything, no matter what. A will that could act against people themselves. In a way, we would already head toward a possible answer to the crucial question: how to explain that the masses think and act against their own interests? Or, as Adorno and Horkheimer would prefer, in favor of the system rather than themselves? In the current case, in which the flow of false information circulates, competing with the truth and overlapping with it, the question of Conrado Ramos (1999, p. 11) is also valid: "why does humanity sink into a new barbarism?"

The Nietzschean quotation above affirms a powerful fear of change that materializes itself in this reclining, this "weakness," i.e., a weak will to power that only aspires to respite, to capitulation, in a word, to nothingness. Such weakness sacralizes this nothingness by naming it the Ideal, the "being," "God!" For Granier:

By denouncing modern decadence, Nietzsche provokes the most terrible crisis of culture, the crisis of nihilism: a frightening revelation of the nothingness of all ideal values, the trembling of speculative constructions in which man alienates

himself, in short, the humiliation inflicted on man's desire and his metaphysical nostalgia. (Granier, 2000, p. 1129; free translation)

THE IMPOSITION OF DISINFORMATION AS THE QUINTESSENCE OF POLITICAL PLATFORMS

Considering the Nietzschean hypothesis of the death of God and the loss of the foundation of the Christian faith to be adequate, as well as the imbalance of our entire system of values, proposes a new system of values, as seen above, which recently led to Nazism.

Well, the historical experience of Nazism has shown that the success of Adolf Hitler's campaign was largely due to investment in the dispossessed, the so-called "apolitical" and middle classes, who, it seems, were "more fragile." Hitler sought, first of all, to turn to the dispossessed segments of the population, without political power and without social importance in the process of industrialization, because he knew he would find not only less resistance to the program of "recovery of the soil and valorization of blood" but also a greater possibility of political rearguard (Marcondes Filho, 1982, p. 49). Moreover,

> Hitler's voters were for the most part apolitical, or, as Hitler's propaganda took care to call them, 'non-deformed voters', who allowed themselves to be imprisoned by Hitler, because their propaganda was intended to awaken in them the illusion that they were important, that everything depended on their strength and that they should be the masters. (Münzenberg, 1972, p. 196-197; free translation)

The middle classes were also less rooted in their own ideas and values than the proletariat and were therefore more fragile and susceptible to National Socialist propaganda (Marcondes Filho, 1982).

Therefore, such political option greatly resembles the contemporary strategies of investing in a manipulative way in elections and political plebiscites: leaving aside the great national campaign "for all," turning, instead, to smaller groups, weakly politicized and susceptible to blackmail of fear and terror. Action took place in small groups. The strategy of the Nazis must not be seen in isolation in its large-scale massification, gatherings, and military festivals and rituals. Equally important was the work done with small and informative groups, which transmitted the ideological concept of fascism (Marcondes Filho, 1982).

The society of the time had no machines and robots that sent electronic messages by the thousands to specific populations at moments of political

decision. Rather, its "manual" was directly aimed at these less politicized layers with important symbolic resources, such as the attribution of importance to figures hitherto marginalized by politics, the creation of hierarchical systems of order and power, and the use of uniforms, flags, and songs to congregate these populations around a chimerical ideal.

Disinformation begot the policy of confusing to thrive:

> National Socialism really gave the impression of a radical transformation: the order and organization of its "soldiers," the vigor of its speeches, the resolve of its agents. The idea of tranquilizing society would be associated with that of 'collaboration between classes' and proletarian power united with corporate ideology. While the former contained more traces of "petty-bourgeois" ideological forms, social ascent, and the attainment of prestige by "class collaboration," the latter sought to give workers the illusion of the conquest of power by the corporation: the factory. (Marcondes Filho, 1982, p. 50; free translation)

The great administrator of the left-wing communication consortium at the time, which concentrated newspapers, magazines, photographers, debate circles, and radio programs, Willi Münzenberg, reports how the forgery confused even politicized characters of the workers' movement, believers in the "socialist" character of the Nazis.

> The method of Hitler's propaganda sought above all to confuse the people and to ensure that even certain socialist circles seriously discussed whether National Socialism was a political movement of the petty bourgeoisie, whereas what really mattered to the effectiveness of Hitler's propaganda was to awaken in these masses the illusion of co-participation, the illusion of being the dominant stratum . . . Hitler's propaganda [achieved] that not only millions of petty bourgeois who were facing bankruptcy but also parts of the wealky engaged working class, especially in 1931 and 1932, hoped for a socialist salvation by the Hitler movement. The author recalls a meeting with a group of workers in Frankfurt in the autumn of 1932. These workers were former members of a socialist organization; they left and became members of the SA. They explained: "We are the old and we remain the old. But for you, things are going very slowly. Adolf does it faster. If he deceives us, we will hang him. We are the SA and then we could build together the socialism Adolf promised us." (Münzenberg, 1972, p. 196-197, 249; free translation)

In fact, the quickest route was the most sinister. Hitler evaded hanging, the SA was dissolved in 1934, and the strategy of falsifying facts and

symbols collaborated, in some way, to strengthen the movement. "The Nazis appropriated the models of the socialist parties, their slogans, organized their public demonstrations and trips according to these models, copied Soviet institutions and methods of propaganda" (Haug, 1975, p. 99[1]; free translation). "At the level of political action, they acted in the same way as the communists, including participation in workers' strikes" (p. 97; free translation).

Nietzsche had warned that the now well-known cautious falsification of facts is part of nihilism:

> Decadence submerged the instincts of life and established the universal realm of its idealistic morality, bringing about the domestication of the temperaments of the elite, the leveling of the natural hierarchy, *the cautious falsification of facts*, the preponderance of gregarious imperatives, the slander of the body, and, in the end, the nihilistic disfigurement of the world. (Granier, 2000, p. 1258; free translation, emphasis added)

A symptom of narcotized spirits that sought to conceal their starvation became, both in Nazism and today, with the manipulative and technologically managed maneuvers in the so-called microtargeting (Marcondes Filho, 2019), a form of action and intervention in politics, directly threatening the free play of democratic forces.

POSTMODERNITY AND ITS PASSIVE NIHILISTS

Nietzsche spoke of passive predatory nihilists driven by despair. David Cook and Arthur Kroker (1988, p. VI), following the Nietzschean path, propose that suicidal nihilism characterizes the so-called postmodern scene, the "new dark age," in which passive nihilists are driven to a predatory style of behavior by despair and self-destruction by their own broken and tattered instincts. For them, the existence of the telematic man is marked by boredom due to his sense of existential emptiness.

Regarding suicidal or passive nihilism, as it is interpreted by some other authors, Arthur Kroker considers it as the current behavior of postmodern man, marked by predatory styles of behavior and a desire for destruction, associated with a suicidal posture. This may explain a lack of interest in politics, in the possibility of politics effectively acting in favor of the less fortunate, but we still have insufficient elements to explain the support of the masses for policies and politicians that ultimately lead them to degradation and death.

[1] It was impossible to obtain all the information in this reference from the author, so it is incomplete in the final list.

In other words, such behavior remains insufficient to explain why Donald Trump recently obtained 23,000 more votes in Wisconsin, 11,000 in Michigan, and another 43,000 in Pennsylvania, totaling the 77,000 votes that decided the U.S. elections.

THE NEW FORMS OF PSYCHOSOCIAL ENGINEERING[2]

During that election, the United States experienced what has been called a "revolution in the way the election campaign is conducted." The phrase stems from Cambridge Analytica, an American affiliate of the Strategic Communication Laboratory (SCL), a company created by billionaire businessman Robert Mercer (cf. Huchon, 2018; Slow, 2018). Its advertising says that gone are the days when political campaigns were based on data of limited effectiveness, such as place of residence, age, and gender. Now, it was a matter of adding many other indicators (such as education, social networks, consumption, travel, family, political interest, gender, hobbies, income), which would be combined with civic and political behavior and consumer profile and lifestyle. These, associated with "personality traits" such as "openness," "conscientiousness," "outgoingness," "agreeableness," and "motivation," would separate people by very precise identifiers, in what they call behavior microtargeting.

Cambridge Analytica obtained from 4 to 5,000 personal data of all people living in the United States. In a personality test conducted in 2014, the company obtained adherence from 300,000 participants. With the availability of Facebook pages, it managed to obtain information from participants and their friends. Thus accumulating data of people who began to be registered without their knowledge. In the operation, the company accused the index of 87 million Facebook user profiles.

Thus, two new strategies, absolutely unprecedented in the political scenario, were inaugurated by the company for the surprising acquisition of votes. The first concerns Trump's election. In this case, the company located three Democratic-leaning American states where the candidate could turn the vote: Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, centering his attack on people with restless and nervous personalities. Unbeknownst to them, the company sent personalized messages to them via Facebook, using a little-known tool, the dark posts. This system sends a message that is only visible to the targeted person. The page lacked that message. Thus, candidates could address individuals with negative phrases about their opponents without journalists ever knowing since the message was private. It is as if they were whispering discrediting news about the adversary in your ear.

Dark posts constitute hyper-individualized messages, visible only to that person for whom it is intended. The phrase is received on the timeline at a certain time, obtained by mapping the favorable habits of that particular voter and by their numerical impressions. No one else receives this message, which will disappear after a few hours. It neither has traces nor enables recovery.

The strategy of the company, rather than simply "throwing phrases," aims to direct a certain type of news, anticipating that, in the mind of the other, it will reverberate exponentially given their psychological profile (in particular, weaknesses, insecurities, and deficiencies). Therefore, rather than a question of the "content of a sentence," it involves the exceptional capacity for intimate propagation of certain themes in certain people.

Manipulation of this kind happened in the election of Donald Trump and in the British decision to leave the European Union, Brexit, situations in which social media served to accumulate data about the entire world, introduce artificial intelligence systems to interpret them, and use what they call "psychosocial engineering" to characterize human types and their political and ideological tendencies.

Mercer SCL has been conducting behavioral change programs for more than 25 years and aims to manipulate behaviors and psychological operations on large masses of people. In the case of politics, it modulated the perception of the vote, using algorithms fed by data provided by voters by banal applications of leisure and fun. By 2014, the company already had about 50 million Facebook profiles in its archives.

INFORMATION REINFORCING THE POSITIONS OF THE UNDECIDED

Fake news lies in the realm of journalism, rather than communication, since we seek the press for facts, events, occurrences that avoid clashing with our worldview, but that, on the contrary, reinforce, sustain, and support it. The news may please us or enrage us, prompting us to act, nevertheless, we trust the source and take it as our ally both in reassurance and in propulsion to action. Communication, on the other hand, which occurs more expressively in the fictional, aesthetic, and cultural fields, confronts us directly with otherness, alters our positioning, and makes us see the world in a different way as long as we consider it.

In the aforementioned episodes, the massive electronically directed use of personalized targets represented a new way of reinforcing positions. The agents of this enterprise of interference in behavior know the weak adherence of the masses to party policies or programs. They are aware of its weakness, its

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inconstancy, its permanent oscillation between discourses and proposals and their fears, insecurities, and weaknesses. We have seen this in previous pages, when it was questioned to what extent we endure the truth, when we spoke of the fear of it and the usefulness of lies in people's lives.

The strategy of this agency was primarily aimed at promoting terror, fear, and doubt – i.e., by emotional means, negative feelings were transferred to the strategy of adversaries. This also emerges in the X-ray of nihilists who fear change, repulsed by their senses and reason, and sustain themselves with chimeras to console their impotence.

Thus, voters are practically forced into the conservative camp, squeezed by this maneuver that will show itself, sometime later, as manipulative. But then the votes will have been tallied and all will win a new round in the following elections.

Psychological graphs recorded how to act to touch the innermost part of each of the users. According to Steve Bannon of Cambridge Analytica, "it all comes down to emotions": love and hate breed engagement. Bannon's advice was the same as that given by Arron Banks, founder of the campaign to leave the European Union, to The Guardian: "What they said early on was 'facts don't work' and that's it. The remain campaign featured fact, fact, fact, fact. It just doesn't work. You have got to connect with people emotionally" (Booth et. al., 2016). Needless to say, the victorious Hitler campaign bet on the "emotionalization" of politics both on the part of its leaders and on the support of paramilitary militia groups that acted on their own and spread terror in the regime.

THE BRAZILIAN CASE

The second and even more efficient strategy was the operation of the same office with the use of WhatsApp. More than 1,500 groups were created in Brazil, most of them outside the country, and only large administrators could post information in them. The platform operated with videos, audios, and chain texts. Participants received and disseminated posts.

The interesting thing is that the use of WhatsApp had as accurate effects as those of the American Facebook and incomparably superior to those of traditional means of communication. In the case of the latter, an institution makes the posts, which people can assess whether or not they deserve credit. On WhatsApp, on the other hand, it is unknown who exactly sent the message, where it came from, how it arrived. It is only known that the last one who posted it is a known source, which may be a friend, a relative, a trusted person.

In communicational terms, the application now functions as an opinion leader or as having the legitimacy of someone who credits the recipient.

This changes everything. For a long time, it was believed that our opinions were constructed, rather than by external, impersonal means, such as newspapers, TV networks, magazines or radio, but by the *relationship of trust* we placed in people close to us, whose opinion we respected and who, for this very reason, would have no reason or interest to deceive us. We had no filter, censorship, or resistance toward them. We just accepted it, a sort of an offshoot of Paul Lazarsfeld's opinion leaders. What happens here is a falsification: the agents of political engineering and microtargeting behavior, via WhatsApp, forge a message from a relative, a friend, a trusted person because it comes in the sequence of posts in the app group. Now, more than a magic phrase that appears on Facebook and then disappears, who knows who issued by whom, now a supposed "friend" emerges and advises the user to vote for x, rather than for y. The accession process will be much more efficient.

In terms of Brazil, the appropriation of Whatsapp decisively influenced the change in the electorate's positioning[3]. On closer inspection, it turns out that it was not only the flood of false information that gave victory to the candidate with no chance in the first round, but the specialty of Cambridge Analytica, microtargeting behavior, directing information to a specific audience: the female, poor, neo-Pentecostal evangelical electorate.

> From the data that reached him, only one Internet page, with an address in the same place where the Bolsonaro Presidente website worked, fired in a single day more than 600 thousand messages with false and slanderous information against Haddad, all of them addressing the moral issue, such as the gay kit, an alleged rape committed by the candidate, encouraging young people to associate with others of the same sex and things along those lines… According to data that reached him, the operation was on a large scale, "just one of the contracts with companies responsible for mass WhatsApp shootings, which were targeted by the Folha de S.Paulo report, reached R$ 12 million." (Nocaute, 2018; free translation)

Coimbra reports that Bolsonaro opened a gap between himself and Haddad, almost tripling the advantage he has always had in the evangelical electorate: "The ten points ahead that he had on September 26 became thirty in the survey completed on October 5. As evangelicals are about 30% of the electorate, thirty points of advantage in the segment represent 10% of the total" (Coimbra, 2019).

[3] The behavior of the curves, which represent the evolution of voting intention for Jair Bolsonaro, quite clearly indicates a sudden increase in his historical average, which oscillated from 20% to 25% of the electorate's preference. According to the graphs, about a week before the first round, numbers changed in a way that deviates from the historical pattern of public opinion movements. Haddad, who had been in a consistent growth movement, suffered a blow and had his trajectory interrupted. Meanwhile, Bolsonaro began an atypical advance, in a pattern that had never been recorded before in the history of opinion polls in Brazil. What explains this, for Marcos Coimbra, was the illegal use of social networks, especially WhatsApp, to disseminate lies and slander against Fernando Haddad and PT (Coimbra, 2018).

Finally, Coimbra considers that what changed the election and enabled Bolsonaro to enter the second round almost elected was not the anti-PT movement, Lava Jato, Moro's sleight of hand, the intervention of generals, the partisanship of the Judiciary, Dilma's government, Lula's imprisonment, the horror of the PT on TV Globo. Rather, it was an abrupt and intense change in the evangelical electorate, especially in the Brazilian Southeast and South, coming from the lower, particularly female, middle class (Coimbra, 2019).

We have here, therefore, three new components in political decisions: a) a game with emotions and the cornering of voters into the conservative camp; b) the falsification of the source of information, simulating trustworthy persons; and c) the choice of particularly fragile groups to target this bombardment. **M**

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