and the Journal of Psychohistory. He has written on trauma, the Oedipus complex, interdisciplinary studies, being human, and presidents Kennedy, Obama, and Trump. His email is kfuchsman@gmail.com. ❑

Jair Bolsonaro Is a Brazilian Bovarist, Not a Trump Clone

Ted Goertzel—Rutgers University

Abstract: Brazil's authoritarian populist President-elect copied some of Donald Trump's electoral techniques, but his personality and ideology are different. He can be described as a Bovarist, a syndrome characterized by a tendency to identify with more powerful and accomplished individuals, which is a form of identification with the aggressor.

Keywords: authoritarian-populism, Bovarism, Brazil, Donald Trump, election-campaign, Jair Bolsonaro, social-media

Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's new president, is sometimes referred to as the Brazilian Trump, but this is superficial. Bolsonaro's use of social media in his campaign was modeled on Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. However, his background and personality are quite different from Trump's, and Brazil as a country has much in common with countries such as India, Turkey, and the Philippines, which have also elected authoritarian populists. While Bolsonaro modeled his campaign strategy on Trump, different personalities and national priorities suggest there will be differences in his style of governing.

Brazil is actually suffering many of the socio-economic problems that Trump falsely claims are happening in the United States: an economic crisis, rising crime rates, and outrageous corruption scandals. But Brazil does not have one issue that has been central to Trump's politics: illegal immigration (except for some isolated areas along the border with Venezuela). The most hopeful possibility is that Brazil's acute problems will give Bolsonaro's government impetus to enact realistic policies, something that does not concern Donald Trump. So far, at least, Bolsonaro has not suggested building a wall on Brazil's border with Venezuela. Trump has illusions of being a financial genius and has, in fact, accumulated a lot of money in sleazy business deals. Bolsonaro has no business background and no illusions about his economic gifts. This is

to Brazil's advantage because he has turned management of the economy over to his finance minister, Paulo Guedes, a conservative economist who is well qualified for the appointment.

Bolsonaro and Trump have the same unrealistic answer to crime, encouraging citizens to use guns and the police to be uninhibited in using their firearms. The difference, however, is that Brazil, unlike the U.S., actually has a very serious crime problem, which may force Bolsonaro's government to do something to modernize and reform the criminal justice system. Bolsonaro's decision to appoint Judge Sérgio Moro, who led the highly effective prosecutions against high officials of the Workers Party government and the state oil company, as Minister of Justice, is encouraging. By contrast, Trump is at war with his own justice department and shows no interest in criminal justice reform. It is hard, on the other hand, to see anything positive in either leader's environmental policies. Bolsonaro may be imitating Trump in promising to leave the Paris Climate Agreement, but he is also responding to strong Brazilian business interests.

Bolsonaro's campaign most resembled Trump's in its use of outrageous sound bites, often spread through Twitter and WhatsApp. His sound bites received an enormous amount of attention, such as telling a woman he wouldn't rape her because she wasn't attractive enough, that he preferred for a homosexual son to die, that the military regime in the 1960s should have killed 30,000 more people, that former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso should be executed, that his opponents will have to choose between exile and prison if he is elected, and so on. However, his supporters insist that these were not to be taken literally; they were meant to get attention. As Brazil's recently elected president, Bolsonaro has not shown any inclination to act on any of the outrageous statements he made during the campaign. These statements were intended to get attention and to communicate feelings, not as policy proposals. He told one journalist, "if I hadn't said Fernando Henrique should be shot, you wouldn't be interviewing me right now." His technique was to "privilege polemic over argumentation" (Author translation: Clóvis Saint Clair, "Discourse and Exacerbation: The Biography and the Semiotics of the Cavalryman," 2018). This technique was highly effective, in part because his Workers' Party opponents took his statements at face value, warning that his election would usher in an unprecedented fascist dictatorship. Other analysts think this is exaggerated, that Brazil is more

likely to return to the milder form of authoritarianism it has experienced many times in its past. Bolsonaro is at war with the left, not with Brazil's establishment. Fernando Henrique Cardoso isn't the least bit worried about facing a firing squad.

Bolsonaro's personal history and psychological makeup are quite different from Donald Trump's (Author translation of Maria Rita Kehl, *Brazilian Bovarysme*, 2018). He was born to a large family of modest means in the interior of the state of São Paulo. His father suffered the humiliation of being denounced for illegally practicing as a dentist. When he was 14, the Brazilian army came into his neighborhood in pursuit of Carlos Lamarca, a captain who had defected to the Marxist guerillas. Bolsonaro had absorbed the anti-communist ideology taught in his school and claims to have given the military information about Lamarca's whereabouts, but psychoanalyst Christian Dunker argues that he admired Lamarca when he escaped the military siege (Author translation: *His Own Shadow*, 2018). Drucker thinks that these feelings may have been rooted in Bolsonaro's sympathy for his father's persecution for illegal dentistry. Dunker observes that "a father who was humiliated and persecuted generally leaves as a trait persistent desires for revenge" (*His Own Shadow*). Trump's father, by contrast, was a very successful real estate mogul, and Trump's psychological challenge may have been keeping up with him.

One of the military officers enticed the young Jair to pursue a military career, and he graduated from a military academy as did Trump, though Trump was sent there to be disciplined. He rose to the rank of captain in field artillery and parachutist units, while Trump was a draft dodger. However, Bolsonaro was rebellious, protesting low pay for military officers and denouncing one of the generals as a racist incompetent. At the end of his military career, he was being investigated as part of a plot to place bombs in the military academy to sow confusion and prove the commanders incompetent. Dunker observes that this showed "traces of the communist captain Lamarca" (*His Own Shadow*). He left the military anticipating that he would be discharged and possibly prosecuted; instead he won a position as Congressman, which offered immunity from prosecution. In Brazil's proportional representation system, strong support from one group can win a seat in Congress. Bolsonaro's core support came from soldiers who appreciated his advocacy of higher military pay.

Bolsonaro served for 27 years as a backbench congressman,

what Brazilians call the "lower clergy." The little national prominence he had came from being an ideological outlier and making extreme statements, and for advocating military pay raises. He was not consistently right-wing and expressed admiration for Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, seeing him as an anti-establishment figure. Christian Dunker says that leaders are substitute fathers who are both feared and submitted to for protection. Dunker argues that "love and hatred for his father coexist in Jair, just as small Captain Bolsonaro loved and hated the Army, just as he obeyed and betrayed his superiors" (*His Own Shadow*). These angry feelings motivated the angry public statements he made, attacking the left, which made him seem more genuine than the typical politician.

Dunker says that Bolsonaro's "hatred is genuine, but the externalization to the enemy is false. For this reason, his speech is relatively empty, elusive, and repetitive and lends itself to being embodied by anyone who has similar indeterminate feelings of revolt" (*His Own Shadow*). Social media provided an excellent medium for brief, angry statements that were often managed by his sons. His campaign got an unexpected boost when he was stabbed by a disturbed man at a campaign rally. His injury gave him a reason to skip the scheduled television debates, which he continued to do even after he was sufficiently recovered. His advisors counseled him to avoid pinning himself down to concrete policy positions or answering technical questions where his ignorance would contrast with the sophistication of his Workers' Party opponent, Fernando Haddad. Bolsonaro's appeal was emotional, not intellectual (Saint-Clair). The contrast between Bolsonaro and Haddad has similarities to that between Trump and Hillary Clinton. Haddad is a policy wonk and a social democrat with strong academic credentials. Bolsonaro is an advocate for military spending with no academic interests or expertise on public policy.

Like Donald Trump, Bolsonaro has been married three times and is prone to making sexist remarks. His statement that a Congresswoman was "not worth raping, she is very ugly," is exactly like one of Trump's statements. When Bolsonaro fathered a daughter, after four sons, he remarked that he had conceived her in "a moment of weakness." (These and similar remarks about homosexuals and the poor are referenced in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jair_Bolsonaro.) Trump, by contrast, is not homophobic and seems happy about having fathered two daughters.

Bolsonaro is not known for bragging about his sexual con-

quests, his looks, or his accomplishments (all of which seem modest). The characterization of "narcissistic personality" so often applied to Donald Trump does not fit Bolsonaro. He can be more convincingly described as Bovarist, a term derived from Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856). Bovarism denotes a tendency to identify with more powerful and accomplished individuals or groups. This is similar to the psychoanalytic concept of identification with the aggressor, although the idealized individuals or groups may not have been personally aggressive toward the subject. It can be expressed in escapist daydreaming that leads to ignoring unpleasant realities. Haitian leader Jean Price-Mars used the term "collective bovarysme" to refer to the Haitian elite's tendency to identify with European whites. In Bolsonaro's case it is expressed as an identification with the leaders of wealthier countries, a disdain for his own country's institutions, and a belief that Brazilian reality can be changed merely by wishing to do so. Asked for a solution to Brazil's economic woes, he advocates doing what the successful countries do. He may, indeed, see himself as Brazil's Donald Trump, but this is mostly style, not substance.

Bolsonaro was inaugurated on January 1, 2019, midsummer in Brazil. Very little political activity takes place between the New Year's holiday and Carnival, which ended on March 9, and it is too early at this writing to judge his regime. Bolsonaro's most important actions during this period were his cabinet appointments. He had promised to cut the cabinet to 16 positions, from 29 in the proceeding government, but actually appointed 22 ministers. Seven of his appointments were military officers, seven have technocratic backgrounds, and eight are politicians. Only two are women and none are black. Ministries that were cut back included science, the environment, and protection of native Brazilians. The appointments suggest that Bolsonaro, like Trump, is responsive to the conservative establishment.

The most important change has been in foreign policy where Brazil has joined the United States and Colombia in recognizing Juan Guaidó as the legitimate president of Venezuela. Under the Workers' Party, Brazil had tried to maintain an independent foreign policy and had been sympathetic to Nicolás Maduro. This suggests a Bovarist tendency to identify with a dominant superpower.

A revealing incident occurred during the Carnival celebration. Bolsonaro posted a video on Twitter showing a man pleasur-

ing himself and enjoying a "golden shower" (being urinated on for sexual pleasure). Bolsonaro used the incident to condemn licentious excesses at Carnival, blaming them on decades of socialist government. His attack on a very popular national institution was widely ridiculed and served no discernable political purpose. One commentator opined that "we must take the unconscious into account. My hypothesis is that the president (and his team) had a profound desire to participate in Carnival and did so by means of the eschatological video."

Bolsonaro's prudish personal psychology contrasts with Donald Trump's lasciviousness; they are very different people. Their political bases, however, are similar. Both appeal to religious conservatives who oppose gay marriage, abortion, and women's liberation and are uncomfortable with social change. Trump's supporters overlook his personal values; Bolsonaro's need not do so. Both find support from the military and from the business elite. Bolsonaro's personal psychology is perhaps more congruent with that of his political base, and he has the advantage of having won the presidency by a landslide. He can claim a strong mandate, but he lacks a strong partisan base in the Brazilian Congress, having been elected without the support of any of the major parties. Trump has been dependent on the Republican establishment in Congress for his policy successes. In both cases, authoritarian populist campaigns served to win popular support for a regime dedicated to the economic interests of the wealthy.

***Ted Goertzel, PhD**, is emeritus professor of sociology at Rutgers University in Camden, NJ. He is author or co-author of Turncoats and True Believers (1992), Linus Pauling: A Life in Science in Medicine (1996), Fernando Henrique Cardoso: Reinventing Democracy in Brazil (1999), Brazil's Lula: Rise and Fall of an Icon (2018), and other works. His seven references were removed by our journal, but are available upon request and his website is http://crab.rutgers.edu/~goertzel. He can be emailed at tedgoertzel @gmail.com.* ❑

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