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SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION THROUGH TRADITIONAL MEDIA: A STUDY OF THE BRAZILIAN CASE BETWEEN 2015 AND 2019

Abstract

Brazil has recently been experiencing a phenomenon of political polarization: a conflict involving political views and social identities. Considering the extent to which this socially constructed conflict has been partially fueled by the media, we propose to use the Social Representations Theory. The present study explores how discourses in the mainstream media construct the political polarization taking place in Brazil. The topics covered in 82 texts published between January 2015 and August 2019 in Brazilian mainstream press, *Folha da S. Paulo* and *Estado de S. Paulo*, were examined using content analysis and Reinert's method with IRaMuTeQ software. A descending hierarchical analysis divided the corpus into four classes, and content analysis showed that both daily newspapers strongly criticized the political polarization underway, which was anchored to and objectified through episodes of violence, and they supported the valorization of democracy.

Keywords: political polarization; social representations; political violence;

Introduction

Brazil has experienced a marked political polarization, especially since the 2015 presidential elections and the events culminating in President Rousseff's impeachment. The phenomenon worsened during the 2018 presidential elections. Episodes of physical violence and even homicides (Giacomozzi et al, in press) exacerbated the polarization between conservative groups (particularly the more right-wing and those against the Workers' Party [PT]) and liberal groups on the left, and far-right discourse against minorities became louder.

Political polarization may be influenced by individuals' and groups' moral convictions (Skitka, Wisneski & Brandt, 2017). According to Yang et al. (2016), social media can promote polarization because most political events are not personally verifiable, and the way the media present them affects people's perception of the political system. Studying ten different countries, the authors found that traditional media were sometimes less significant sources of polarization than online and social media, and research has recently focused more on the latter

(Bavel et al, 2021; Paciello et al, 2021). Analyzing the politically polarizing influence of traditional media as a cultural outcome nonetheless remains important.

The political group in power in Brazil has changed in recent years. After the country had been ruled by the PT for 13 years, the president's impeachment in 2015 and the 2018 elections established a right-wing party in Brasilia. When political regimes change, new representations of history implicitly gain political and institutional legitimacy, reshaping the power hierarchy between different social identities (Kus, Liu & Ward, 2013). Brazil's political polarization has given rise to antagonistic views of the country's history. Among other ideas, right-wing groups attribute corruption in Brazil to left-wing parties (especially the PT), while liberal groups view corruption as endemic in the country; and the former deny the latter's claim that Brazil was previously under a military dictatorship.

We suggest that such opposing views on its history have generated and sustain the country's political polarization. As these views involve productions of meaning that shape social groups from a socio-constructivist perspective, Social Representations Theory (SRT; Moscovici, 1961) may help us to analyze Brazilian political polarization in depth.

Media and SRs

Social representations (SRs) are part of our everyday thinking, giving coherence to our ideological beliefs (Moscovici, 1988). Through the lens of SRT, our historical and social context is conceived as a set of external factors affecting our SRs, and as realities stemming from our SRs (Camargo, Scholösser & Giacomozzi, 2018).

According to Moscovici (1961), SRs are reworked when they are disseminated by the media, which act as great mediators in the production of public approval. The media instigate the construction of new SRs, or the consolidation of those already being processed in social thought (Clémence, Green & Courvoisier, 2011). SRs are produced through discourses, narratives (Moscovici 1984), texts, cultural artifacts, and images (Jodelet, 1989; (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015) - all of which are disseminated by the media.

Several studies applying SR theory to explain the media's influence, revealed a convergence between the press and the public's perception over time (Bauer, 2002). As common-sense content circulates and is recycled, what is old can seem new because communication induces complex transformations in common sense (Castro & Gomes, 2005). Two of the most important systems involved in these transformations are interpersonal communication and the press (Marková, 2000; Bauer, 2002; (Castro et al., 2011)). SRT has

several analytical tools for examining the latter's functioning and impact. One is anchoring, a process regulated by a socio-normative meta-system and involved in classifying people, objects or ideas. The selection of anchoring categories derives from the socio-normative meta-system that organizes groups' lives (Castro & Gomes, 2005). Another tool is objectification, or making concrete what was previously abstract (Moscovici, 1988). These two processes are not separate, but two sides of the same story (Marková, 2000), interwoven and partly simultaneous (Hakoköngäs & Sakki, 2016).

Research conducted within the social representations approach reveals how people's opinions follow previously held positions and inter-group processes (Elcheroth et al., 2011) – a situation that has become blatantly clear through apparently apolitical issues, such as mask mandates, vaccination or climate change. This happens because our capacity to understand phenomena and their meaning relies on shared fields of knowledge that regulate where phenomena are situated within a broader social field. Political views exist on two levels: on the field of knowledge, we base them on; and on how our knowledge of specific objects reinforces, and is reinforced by our worldviews (Elcheroth, 2011).

The present study

This paper analyzes how traditional Brazilian media with different ideological backgrounds have contributed to constructing the discourse on political polarization in times when episodes of political violence have occupied more and more space in the papers.

Method

Our analysis of traditional media focused on two main Brazilian newspapers, *Folha de S. Paulo* and *Estado de S. Paulo*, because their arguments are shared by the country's social groups. These two dailies are essentially the main voices in the country's media arena (Allain & Camargo, 2007). Discussing their political stance, Taschner (1992) identified the *Estado de S. Paulo* (founded in 1885) as more conservative, initially representing the rural elites, while the *Folha de S. Paulo* (founded by a group of journalists in 1921) took an opposing, more liberal stance. Although some would disagree with this classification, we assume the two newspapers' political positions remain much the same today for the purposes of our analysis.

Articles published between January 2015 and August 2019 were accessed online to investigate the debate on political polarization in Brazil from President Rousseff's impeachment to the 2018 elections and their aftermath. There were 82 articles containing the

keyword ‘political polarization’, and dealing specifically with the topic, which were made up of our textual corpus.

Data analysis

First step – *Descending hierarchical analysis (DHA)*

The textual material was analyzed with IRaMuTeQ, using a DHA that revealed contexts (lexical classes) characterized by the co-occurrence of certain words. Main word clusters were detected with the Reinert method, with the IRaMuTeQ software (Ratinaud, & Marchand, 2012), running an analysis with each article as a unit of analysis. Using the Reinert method, clusters are defined as ‘lexical words’, or groups of words referring to a class of meaning. The words forming a cluster are identified by means of their co-occurrence in the elementary unit of context. The dendrogram obtained from the DHA groups words or multi-words into classes.

Second step: *Content analysis*

A content analysis conducted on each text (as a unit of analysis) was used to construct structural and content categories (Bardin, 1977). The structural categories were: year, newspaper, length of text (notes x more extensive articles), author (researcher, journalist, politician; not specified); stance of the text in relation to political polarization (‘not taking sides’, when it addresses political polarization and points out responsibilities on both sides; ‘one-sided’, when arguments against one or other side of the political spectrum are dominant, or when political polarization is attributed to one side; ‘neutral’, when historical and social aspects of polarization are mentioned to contextualize and clarify the phenomenon without holding any one side to account).

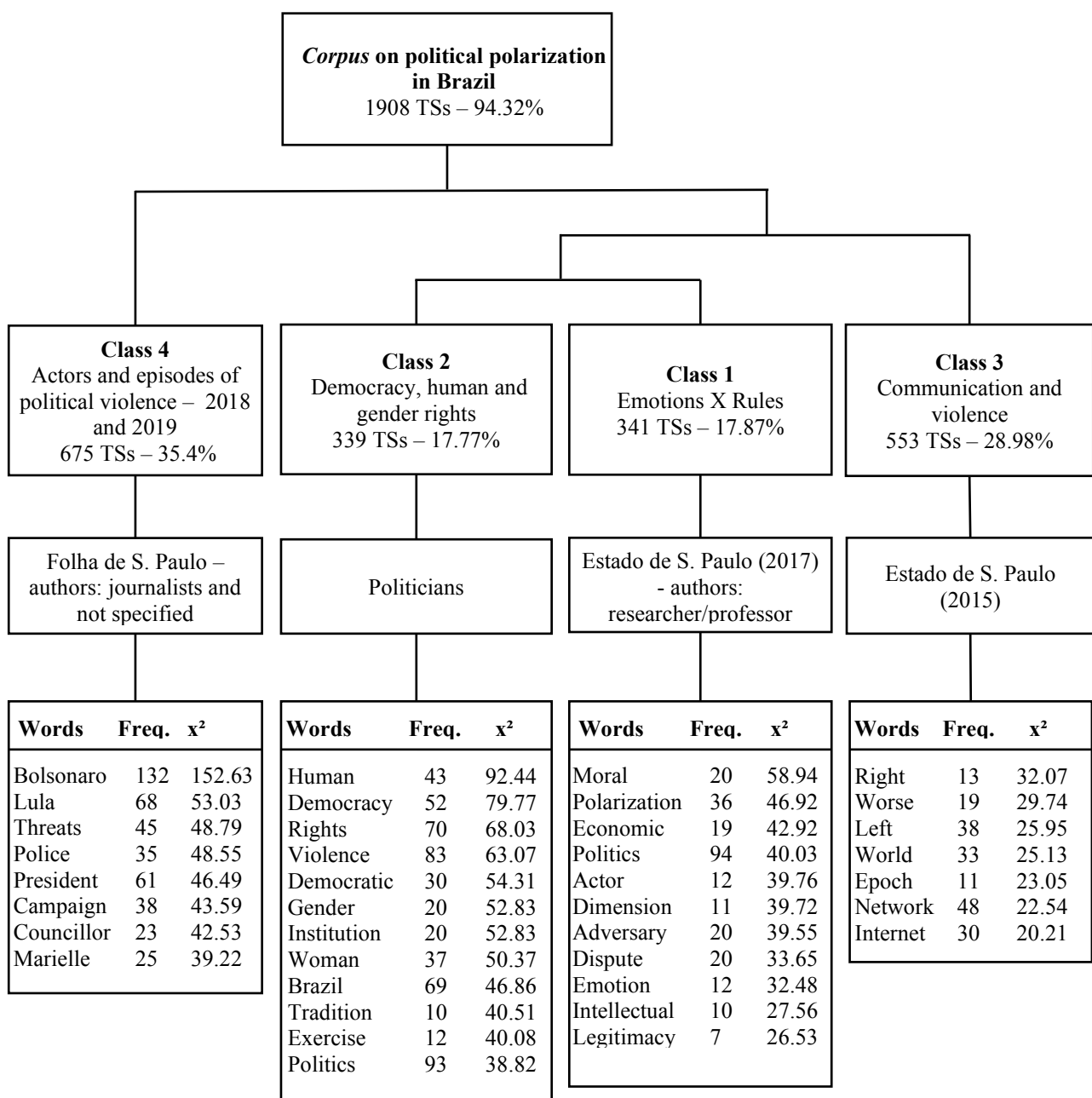
The first two authors of the present paper read and classified all the texts in this way: a) initially the texts were organized into a single corpus; b) both judges did an initial reading of data and in a process of reflection elaborated hypotheses about the data collected and the objective of the research; c) analysis categories were delineated and the judges elaborated a categorization scheme; d) exploration of material, operations to code the corpus were carried out individually, in which each judge used the categorization scheme drawn up by both; e) subsequently, in order to ensure the quality of the data, we realized the agreement analysis between the individual categorizations. The level of coding agreement between the judges was 68%, as per Holsti's (1969) agreement percentage. After the rediscussion of the categorization by the judges, the level of agreement increased to 98%.

Results

Descending hierarchical analysis

The 82 initial texts, totaling 71,782 occurrences, were deployed in 2,023 text segments (TSs), 94.32% of which were retained by DHA. After lemmatization, 7,725 different forms were identified.

Figure 1: Political polarization in Brazil



Source: the authors

In the first partition, the corpus was divided into two sub-corpora: A was named Emotions x Rules of Democracy (Classes 2, 1 and 3); and B was named Political Violence, meaning episodes of physical or verbal violence, according to the texts, on the part of the presidential candidate Bolsonaro (Class 4). The second partition differentiated between classes 2 and 1, which respectively indicate a relationship between an intergroup end (Class 2) and an interpersonal end (Class 1) of Class 3 – in other words, with the Internet as an important vehicle for political polarization and political violence. The dendrogram shows the distribution of the classes with details of their content.

Class 4 is opposed to all the other classes. It was associated with texts written in 2018 and 2019, by journalists or unnamed authors, and published in the Folha de S. Paulo. This class reveals how political polarization peaked in Brazil during 2018 and 2019, mainly personified by Bolsonaro, and anchoring and objectifying this violence through several episodes of violence and politically-motivated deaths in Brazil.

“(…) the capoeira teacher Moa do Katendê (...) was murdered, stabbed 12 times by a Bolsonaro supporter with whom he had an argument in a bar after the results of the first round of voting were published” (Text 26, written by a journalist, October, 2018, Folha de S. Paulo).

Class 4 also groups texts that deal with Bolsonaro’s accountability for his hate speech, underscoring the danger to Brazil when powerful people adopt such a discourse. The texts also mention the violence suffered by the candidate himself as something unacceptable in a democratic culture.

“We are aware that Brazil has a homophobic culture. When the president opens the gate, all the devils are set free (...) President Bolsonaro, who, in 2011, went so far as to say that he would prefer his son to be dead rather than gay. In October last year, after episodes of violence committed all over the country by some of his supporters), Bolsonaro released a note saying: (...) ‘I ask you to cast a null vote or vote for the opposition, for the sake of consistency; besides, the authorities will take the appropriate measures, also against the slanderers trying to harm us’, wrote the then presidential candidate, who was himself the target of one of the most violent

episodes of the campaign when he suffered a knife attack in September” (Text 35, journalist, January 2019, Folha de S. Paulo).

A connection is also made between current political figures and those of the past, or even legends and myths, in an attempt to explain political violence.

“(…) Despite the fashion for describing ourselves as a peaceful people, Brazil has a violent streak. Violence is everywhere and cannot be absent from politics. It emerges in several ways. The mild ones are symbolic: Bolsonaro with Hitler’s moustache, Temer dressed as a vampire, Lula as Pixuleco. Many are more serious. Some people at a cancelled protest in Medianeira had brought dung to throw at opponents. Others near them were more successful throwing eggs, and some resorted to whipping, stoning and shooting. When bullets hit Marielle’s car and Lula’s bus, even Temer was outraged (…)”. (Text 33, professor/researcher, April 2018, Folha de S. Paulo).

Class 2 contains 339 TSs (17.77% of the corpus) and is associated with authors involved in politics. Class 2, “Democracy and Human Rights”, is related to Class 1 as it includes texts condemning political polarization and fearing serious damage to democracy. Several texts were written by women politicians from left-wing parties, and one was written by a representative of an NGO against gender violence on women in Brazil’s political world. She draws attention to the need to respect human rights in a democratic society. Political violence is presented as a confrontation between groups (men versus women; left versus right, etc.) using a defensive rhetoric that legitimizes the position of the ingroup (women) and delegitimizes the practices of the outgroup (mainly sexist, prejudiced and violent men against women in politics).

“(…) no political disagreement or protest justifies the trivialization of gender violence, a patriarchal and misogynistic practice that shatters human dignity (...) UN Women follows the Brazilian political context with great concern, and publicly calls for protection for the democratic state and rule of law. UN Women addresses Brazilian society and calls for serenity in demonstrations and non-violence in the public debates essential to a democratic management of the country’s political decisions (...)” (Text 19, journalist; March 2016, Folha de S. Paulo).

Class 1 includes texts insisting on the need to comply with political rules, to respect one’s opponents, and to adopt a set of socially-validated ethics, especially in sensitive moments

like the mourning of former-president Lula's wife. This class presents conflicts from an interpersonal angle, emphasizing that opponents are human beings, whatever the political differences. It is a call from the traditional media to abandon the conflictual stance between groups in times of crisis, and to focus on the interpersonal aspects.

“Brazilian political polarization has thus moved into dangerous territory, treading on the emotional rules relating to death (mourning and compassion). This is dangerous ground not only because it ignores one of the fundamental moral dogmas of our society, but also because, by touching on such a delicate subject, it has the potential to exacerbate moral indignation and the stereotyping of political opponents, raising people's dehumanization and resentment to hitherto unseen levels. Denying a person compassion when a member of their family dies is a serious indication that the person is not acknowledged as human, but only envisaged as evil” (Text 43, researcher/professor, February 2017, Estado de S. Paulo).

The author of the above text could not be accused of taking sides, however, because - he also mentions how the situation was to mobilize Lula's political supporters against his opponent:

“(…) The political conflict on emotions neither stopped at this point, nor on one side, however. Lula's supporters exploited people's indignation over his political opponents' disregard for the emotional rule as a way to accuse them, sensitize people, and mobilize combativeness (…)”

Class 3 addresses the phenomenon of violence and political polarization, anchoring and objectifying this violence through the confrontation between Brazilian political groups.

“Right-wingers for the sake of convenience and staunch right-wingers are jumbled together and weaken the right. (...) The problem of the right has always been, and continues to be that it fights the left as if the left were the devil, the cause of all evils in the world. Right-wingers see the left as a monolithic block to be attacked head on, without drawing any clear distinctions” (Text 60, journalist, November 2015; Estado de S. Paulo).

The texts in Class 3 also analyze the role of the Internet as a vehicle for disseminating political polarization.

“A psychologist has written that the people who are most aggressive on the internet are helpless and frustrated: their sense of impotence and frustration makes them need to impose on other people. This is how the American psychologist Pamela Rutledge (...) judges the aggressiveness of many social media commentators in times of political polarization in Brazil” (Text 71, researcher/professor, September 2015, Folha de S. Paulo).

Content analysis

The distribution of the articles remained relatively stable over time, peaking steeply during the run-up to the elections (second semester of 2018), with 25 articles published in 2018, and 20 in 2019. Of 82 articles, 57 were published in the Folha de S. Paulo, and 25 in the Estado de S. Paulo. The articles included 68 long texts and 14 short notes (less than 10 lines). In both papers, the texts were written mainly by experts/researchers on political sociology, politics and other social sciences (33), and journalists (31). They all strongly condemned violence and political extremism, using various arguments.

Table 1 shows that 28 articles used balanced arguments to discuss political polarization. In other words, these articles addressed the subject, criticized violence, and held both sides involved in the conflict accountable, without identifying culprits on one or other side of the political spectrum. Another 28 articles criticized political violence by pointing a finger at one side of the political spectrum, with 19 articles openly criticizing Bolsonaro for his hate speech, and as an instigator of violent acts. Another two articles criticized the politicians Dilma and Lula. The others were broadly critical of the right or the left, without citing specific politicians' names. Finally, 26 articles addressed historical aspects of political violence, critically analyzing it in context. These articles were classified as neutral as regards the issues debated in the present; they sought explanations without pointing at any 'culprits' in the political arena.

Most of the publications in the Folha de S. Paulo were articles that took sides, whilst the Estado de S. Paulo concentrated more on articles taking a balanced stance on the facts. As for the authors, both newspapers gave much the same space to texts authored by researchers and by journalists. The only difference was a space made available to politicians in the Folha de S. Paulo for texts written by women on gendered political polarization and violence. Three of the four texts were written by women politicians from left-wing parties, and one was written by the president (a woman) of an NGO concerned with women.

Media productions on political polarization in Brazil are complex and illustrate Brazil's current situation with in-depth analyses of the facts, contextualizing them historically and socially.

Table 1. Analysis of categories

		Folha	Estado	Total
Depth	Short notes	11	3	14
	Full articles	46	22	68
Approach	Balanced arguments	15	13	28
	One-sided	22	6	28
	Neutral	20	6	26
Authors	Researcher/Professor	23	10	33
	Journalist	22	9	31
	Politician	4	0	4
	Not stated	8	6	14

Our analysis shows that the two newspapers were strongly critical regarding Brazil's political polarization, and the one-sided arguments are higher in Folha de S. Paulo than in Estado de S. Paulo. Both newspapers, and the Folha de S. Paulo in particular, criticized Bolsonaro's hate speech. They gave more space to voices against polarization, and especially against the violence of Bolsonaro's followers - though they also mentioned the acts of violence provoked by political agents linked to left-wing parties (mainly in texts written in 2015, when the PT was still in power). As a rule, the arguments in the two dailies were in favor of respect for differences, human rights and democracy.

Discussion

The present investigation explored how the traditional media in Brazil present and use arguments to shape the phenomenon of intense political polarization the country has been experiencing in recent times. According to Thompson (2005), analyses of the type conducted here are relevant because we live in a society where, although it is not always apparent, the media have an important role in our lives. They affect our daily conversations and sometimes influence our choices. The socio-cultural context also has a strong effect on the way the same event is represented by the media in different countries (Caillaud, Flick & Kalampalikis, 2012).

The texts identified in the traditional media reflected on how Brazil's political polarization in recent times is anchored and objectified through episodes of violence. They document situations in which different political groups engaged in acts of verbal and psychological violence between 2015 and 2017, and even in murder in 2018. The situation was especially bad in the months of the presidential election campaign, when Brazilian political polarization reached a peak, and when most of the texts examined were published.

DHA divided the texts into four categories. The first contains texts reporting the facts about the acts of aggression perpetrated and suffered during the period examined, revealing Brazil's profound political polarization associated with the figures of Bolsonaro and Lula, but mainly with the former, and his hate speech (Class 4). Several texts also criticized former President Dilma Rousseff, especially among those published in 2015 during her administration, but – because most of the texts analyzed were published in 2018, those criticizing Bolsonaro and Lula, who were important figures at the time, were much more numerous.

When SRs enter the social and psychological domain, people tend to take a stance and customize them (Jaspal & Nerlich, 2017). Moscovici and Hewstone (1983) identified three sub-processes associated with objectification, namely: embodiment of knowledge, figuration and ontologization. The embodiment of knowledge connects the abstract object of social representation, identity and socio-psychological action to a person or group, lending the object a greater consistency through such association. It is worth mentioning that, within the polarized Brazil, Bolsonaro personifies the right, and Lula the left. The role of these two political actors was quite important during the years under analyses. Political leaders' points of view are important because they may shape representational systems that contribute to creating social realities that serve their interests, or their worldviews. Social representations do not develop spontaneously. People see the world in a particular way if they are constantly exposed to certain points of view, validated by the groups to which they belong. That is why political leaders who

target certain social groups with aggressive words may encourage acts of violence against the groups concerned.

In developing our SRs, what we think about an object is not enough. We are also influenced by what we think other people think. Meta-knowledge is important to understanding SRs because we respond differently to what others think and do. If people who side with the right or left, or political leaders adopt a certain type of behavior, we tend to react differently, depending on which side we support (Moscovici, 1988). Some issues have been politicized in Brazil due to the stance taken by certain politicians and their supporters.

Two important premises to bear in mind when studying politics through the lens of SRs are that such representations are a form of shared knowledge, and that collective experience contributes towards the construction of social behavior. Another premise is that when new phenomena emerge, they are foregrounded on already known phenomena (Moscovici, 2008). So, when Brazilians hear a presidential candidate using an aggressive discourse against minority groups, his political opponents compare him and his team rhetorically and aesthetically with Adolf Hitler (the same happened with Saddam Hussein, for instance), as Herrera and Reicher (1998) pointed out.

The two, interconnected classes identified by the DHA relate to intergroup relations. One of them (Class 2) is characterized by the confrontation between groups on the right and left, or between left-wing women and right-wing men. The other (Class 1) concerns an interpersonal rather than intergroup level, also when considering relations between politicians with opposing views, with texts insisting on the need for compassion and respect for an opponent's bereavement, and focusing on personal emotions.

The fourth class includes texts that explicitly analyze the role of online communications and social networks as a vector for political polarization. There has been a growing involvement of mass communication and the media in various political arenas. The exchange between the media and politics is important in political parties' public relations, marketing techniques and advertising, in campaigns and administrations. This also regards the role of journalists as reporters, interpreters, commentators and agenda-makers, as their relationship of mutual dependence with politicians shapes the behavior and professional practices of both groups (MacNair, 2017).

As our content analysis showed, the texts retrieved tended to show respect for political opponents, citizens' human rights, and a clean and fair democratic game. It is important to emphasize that this applied to the texts of both the newspapers examined, although they have historically taken opposing political stances. The differences between the two newspapers'

approaches related to the way their arguments were presented: the Folha de S. Paulo allocated some journalistic space for women politicians from left-wing parties to write about gendered political violence, and published more texts that took sides, while the arguments in the texts in the Estado de S. Paulo were more balanced. We also noticed that the Folha de São Paulo published a much larger number of texts on the subject, which may signal a greater concern with the issue.

On the other hand, presenting events in a neutral tone, reporting the news with little comment and without taking a stance, could pose a risk of legitimizing political polarization and violence. By describing events and news simply as the ‘state of affairs’, the press could facilitate the ‘transformation of ideas into things’ highlighted by reference theory, thereby limiting its role as a mechanism for promoting reflection). This brings to mind the ideas advanced by Mazzara and Leone (2016) regarding the role of the press in the communication of political and economic choices, in contrast with constitutional dictates. The authors emphasized the need for journalistic communication to set aside a generalized trend to offer generic assurances and to refer too easily to an equally generic and undefined fear. The historic challenges facing Brazil (and other countries) today therefore cannot be met without an increase in citizens’ democratic awareness.

Furthermore, it is necessary to say that Brazil is a country where there are several types of violence, nonetheless, the naturalization of the violence stemming from a violent colonization process marked by the genocide of native peoples, adds to this situation (Gomes et al., 2019). Despite this origin, the myth of the non-violent Brazilian circulates to this day, naturalizing violence not to question it (Chauí, 2019). The state violence against black people (Vitali et al., 2021) is an example of the violence practiced daily against a social group in the country.

Political polarization is yet another psychosocial process that can inflate the forms of violence that already exist in the country. It is possible to say that political polarization added to the danger of fake news (Sousa Júnior et al. 2020) ends up deteriorating intergroup relations, and is therefore harmful to society. This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, whose polarized institutional discourses in several countries (de Rosa et al 2021), informational polarization (Justo et al, 2020) and political belonging mainly influenced right-wing groups in disbelief about the lethality of the disease and non-adherence to hygiene and isolation measures recommended by health authorities (Giacomozzi et al 2022; Rozendo, et al, 2022).

Final considerations

Of course, no analysis on articles published in the press will be able to account for all the variety of opinions and arguments on the topic of political polarization in a given community or country. It nonetheless seemed worthwhile to examine how two important voices of the Brazilian national press “gave visibility” to this phenomenon and the arguments they put forward to explain it.

A limitation of the present study lies in the small number of texts identified on the topic being analyzed. Further studies on the subject perhaps analyzing the comments of the readers in the social networks of the newspapers or with other methodologies could contribute towards the identification of potential “pathways to a change” in a country’s political polarization on both the individual and the social levels.

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