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When the square becomes a trench: political myths and the weakening of democratic debate

Quando a praça vira trincheira: mitos políticos e o enfraquecimento do debate democrático
Cuando la plaza se convierte en trinchera: mitos políticos y el debilitamiento del debate democrático

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Abstract:
A forceful political statement may be legally protected and still, in later uses, become part of a narrative that anticipates judgements and dispenses with the examination of the matter under discussion. The phenomenon investigated here is restricted: events, accusations or epithets come to form part of persistent stories about adversaries or protectors, and, once the label is used to answer new questions, certain replies no longer examine the bill, the vote or the argument and reaffirm a previously attributed characterisation. The reconstruction starts from the constitutional case law that protects radical speech, with attention to the Soldaten sind Mörder case (1994/1995), proceeds through the contemporary reorganisation of the circulation of political speech and arrives at the theory of political myth (Barthes, Edelman, Flood, Bottici), from which a criterion is drawn for distinguishing verifiable accusation, epithet, framing and myth, and for identifying what distinguishes the replacement of examination by a narrative characterisation from its replacement by an insult or an isolated accusation. The result is not a diagnosis of democratic decline but the description of one modality of discursive displacement, identifiable in delimited episodes by two requirements — narrative integration of the characterisation and effective replacement of examination — whose occurrence must be demonstrated case by case and whose effects on reception are not presumed. The protection of expression is a condition of plurality; it is not an endorsement of the inferences drawn from it.

Keywords:
political myth; freedom of expression; displacement of the object; political narrative; hybrid communication.

Resumo:
Uma frase política contundente pode ser juridicamente protegida e, ainda assim, em usos posteriores, converter-se em peça de uma narrativa que antecipa julgamentos e dispensa o exame do assunto em discussão. O fenômeno aqui investigado é restrito: acontecimentos, acusações ou epítetos passam a integrar histórias persistentes sobre adversários ou protetores, e, quando o rótulo passa a responder a questões novas, determinadas réplicas deixam de examinar o projeto, o voto ou o argumento e reafirmam uma caracterização previamente atribuída. A reconstrução parte da jurisprudência constitucional que protege a palavra radical, com atenção ao caso Soldaten sind Mörder (1994/1995), passa pela reorganização contemporânea da circulação da fala política e chega à teoria do mito político (Barthes, Edelman, Flood, Bottici), da qual se extrai um critério para distinguir acusação verificável, epíteto, enquadramento e mito, e se identifica o que distingue a substituição do exame por uma caracterização narrativa da substituição por um insulto ou por uma acusação isolada. O

resultado não é um diagnóstico de declínio democrático, mas a descrição de uma modalidade de deslocamento discursivo, identificável em episódios delimitados por dois requisitos — integração narrativa da caracterização e substituição efetiva do exame —, cuja ocorrência deve ser demonstrada caso a caso e cujos efeitos sobre a recepção não se presumem. A proteção da expressão é condição da pluralidade; não é chancela da inferência que se faz a partir dela.

Palavras-chave:
mito político; liberdade de expressão; deslocamento do objeto; narrativa política; comunicação híbrida.

Resumen:
Una frase política contundente puede estar jurídicamente protegida y, aun así, en usos posteriores, convertirse en pieza de una narrativa que anticipa juicios y prescinde del examen del asunto en discusión. El fenómeno aquí investigado es restringido: acontecimientos, acusaciones o epítetos pasan a integrar historias persistentes sobre adversarios o protectores y, cuando la etiqueta pasa a responder a cuestiones nuevas, determinadas réplicas dejan de examinar el proyecto, el voto o el argumento y reafirman una caracterización previamente atribuida. La reconstrucción parte de la jurisprudencia constitucional que protege la palabra radical, con atención al caso Soldaten sind Mörder (1994/1995), pasa por la reorganización contemporánea de la circulación del discurso político y llega a la teoría del mito político (Barthes, Edelman, Flood, Bottici), de la cual se extrae un criterio para distinguir acusación verificable, epíteto, encuadre y mito, y se identifica lo que distingue la sustitución del examen por una caracterización narrativa de la sustitución por un insulto o por una acusación aislada. El resultado no es un diagnóstico de declive democrático, sino la descripción de una modalidad de desplazamiento discursivo, identificable en episodios delimitados por dos requisitos — integración narrativa de la caracterización y sustitución efectiva del examen —, cuya ocurrencia debe demostrarse caso por caso y cuyos efectos sobre la recepción no se presumen. La protección de la expresión es condición de la pluralidad; no es aval de la inferencia que se hace a partir de ella.

Palabras clave:
mito político; libertad de expresión; desplazamiento del objeto; narrativa política; comunicación híbrida.

Introduction — Free speech and the public square

The democratic public square does not exist to accommodate only agreeable opinions. Its purpose lies, on the contrary, in protecting speech that unsettles: harsh criticism of the ruler, allegations the accused would prefer to silence, the proposition the majority considers absurd. Mill formulated the classical justification for this protection: silencing an opinion deprives humanity of a possible truth or, if the opinion is false, of the more vivid perception of truth that confrontation with error would produce (MILL, 1859, ch. II). Habermas described the public sphere as the space in which private individuals, assembled as a public, subject power to the argumentative use of reason (HABERMAS, 2003). In both cases, freedom of expression is the

condition for the other democratic guarantees; protection that depended on the recipient liking what they hear would protect no dissent at all.

The problem to be investigated arises from a distinction that this starting point makes possible. Protecting a statement is one thing; assessing what it demonstrates and how it is used is another. A court that overturns a conviction for insult establishes that the judges could not convict on those grounds; it does not declare the expression lawful, much less true, fair or useful to debate. Above all, it says nothing about what happens when the same statement, repeated and incorporated into a shared story about who the adversary "is", begins to function as a ready-made answer to questions it has never examined.

It is this second moment that matters here. A legislator votes against a bill; someone asks why; the answer is an epithet. A public administrator changes a programme; the question about the reasons receives a moral characterisation of the person who made the change. In these episodes, hypothetical for now, the discussion has not lost free speech. It has lost its subject. The object has shifted from the bill, vote or decision to the identity attributed to the actor, and that identity, once established, has been offered as an explanation of new facts instead of their examination.

The question is therefore delimited: how can events, statements and accusations be converted into persistent narratives about political adversaries, and how can the public reproduction of these narratives replace, in particular cases, examination of the content under discussion with the reaffirmation of a label? The provisional answer is conditional and restricted. A forceful political expression may be legally protected and, at the same time, cease to refer to the act that prompted it and begin to refer to the person who performed it. When this characterisation is incorporated into a shared story — with episodes, roles and a common political meaning — it becomes available as an answer to events that have not yet occurred. What is investigated here is a particular form of replacement of examination: one in which the answer to a question about a bill, vote or decision is the narrative characterisation of the person who defended it. It is not claimed that every displacement depends on a narrative, or that narrative causes it. That replacement occurs is a discursive operation observable in particular episodes; whether it is accepted by its recipients is another question, requiring its own evidence and not presumed here.

The method is conceptual and documentary. Case law provides the initial contrast between the protection of speech and judgement of its deliberative value. Media theory explains why a representation can now be reapplied to different events by participants who do not control the medium. The theory of political myth offers the instrument for distinguishing a verifiable

accusation, an epithet, a frame and a shared narrative — and for saying what narrative adds to an accusation when the answer to one subject begins to serve for any other. Hypothetical examples, identified as such, show the analytical transition from one level to another; actual expressions from Brazilian debate appear only as circulating terms whose documentary examination remains open. The route proceeds from legally protected plurality to radical speech in context, from there to the means of circulation, from circulation to the formation of myth, from myth to the replacement of the subject, and finally to objections that limit the argument. What is promised is not proof of decline, but a distinction that makes it possible to recognise, when it occurs, the moment when the square becomes a trench.

1. Freedom of expression and radical speech

The constitutional tradition of liberal democracies protects dissent on different grounds and within different limits, and four decisions often arranged as an evolutionary sequence actually address different controversies. Lüth (1958) examined a call to boycott a film directed by a filmmaker associated with the National Socialist regime and established that fundamental rights radiate into private law (BVerfGE 7, 198). New York Times Co. v. Sullivan (1964) required, for liability for defaming a public official, proof of knowledge of falsity or reckless disregard for the truth (376 U.S. 254). Brandenburg v. Ohio (1969), addressing a Ku Klux Klan leader's speech, limited punishment of advocacy to advocacy directed to inciting imminent unlawful action and likely to produce it (395 U.S. 444). Handyside v. United Kingdom (1976) affirmed that freedom of expression encompasses ideas that offend, shock or disturb — yet concluded that the seizure of the book in question had not violated the Convention (ECtHR, 5493/72). Boycott, defamation of an official, incitement, protection of minors: none of these decisions concerns the phenomenon investigated here, and none explains contemporary political communication. Placing them at the beginning describes a permissive condition, not a cause.

The scene to be developed is different, and must be reconstructed carefully because it is often recounted in conflated form. “Soldaten sind Mörder” — “soldiers are murderers” — is a phrase by Kurt Tucholsky published in 1931 in Die Weltbühne, whose editor, Carl von Ossietzky, was prosecuted over it in 1932. Reappropriated by German pacifists in the late 1980s, the phrase prompted several convictions for insult (§ 185 of the German Criminal Code), and two decisions of the Federal Constitutional Court, different in form and impact, addressed them.

The first is a chamber decision of 25 August 1994 (1 BvR 1423/92). A conscientious objector had displayed the phrase on a sticker on his car, alongside other pacifist messages, during the 1991 Gulf War, and had been convicted of incitement to hatred and, on appeal, also of insult. The chamber overturned the decisions and remanded the case to the lower court because the judges had adopted the offensive interpretation without excluding, on sufficient grounds, the contextual reading according to which the phrase criticised war and the military profession in general rather than imputing a crime to particular soldiers. The decision provoked intense public reaction: in September 1994 the governing parliamentary groups in the Bundestag introduced a draft resolution reaffirming respect for the Court while expressing concern about the misunderstandings the decision might generate (Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 12/8523).

The second decision was issued by the First Senate on 10 October 1995 and published in BVerfGE 93, 266. The Court joined four pending complaints — a bedsheet hung during a NATO manoeuvre, a leaflet distributed outside a Bundeswehr exhibition, a reader's letter quoting Tucholsky, a banner displayed in front of a military stand — and held, by a majority and with a dissenting opinion, that all the convictions, insofar as the complaints were admissible, violated Article 5(1) of the Basic Law. The decisions were overturned and the cases remanded to the lower courts, which could convict again provided that they excluded the non-offensive readings on reasoned grounds and performed the specific balancing they had omitted. There was no acquittal; the Court did not declare the expressions lawful and did not affirm a right to offend: it held that the convictions, as reasoned, violated freedom of opinion.

What the Senate said is more interesting than the caricature. First, the expressions were value judgements about the military profession, not assertions that particular soldiers had committed homicides; as value judgements, they were protected regardless of whether they were rational or emotional, grounded or ungrounded, useful or harmful (BVerfGE 93, 266 [289 ff.]). Second, every legal assessment of an expression requires its meaning to have been correctly understood; where a statement permits more than one reading, a judge who adopts the interpretation supporting conviction without excluding the others on consistent grounds violates freedom of opinion, as does one who reads in a technical sense a word used colloquially (BVerfGE 93, 266 [295 ff.]). Third, a statement about all the soldiers in the world does not thereby affect the personal honour of every member of a subgroup; treating criticism of a social function as defamation of identifiable individuals requires specifying the circumstances that warrant that transition (BVerfGE 93, 266 [296-303]). Fourth, the category of “defamatory criticism” — Schmähkritik, in which disparagement of the person takes centre stage and

discussion of the matter disappears — is narrow; on a matter essentially concerning the public, a presumption favours freedom of speech, and anyone seeking to rebut it must demonstrate that, in the case at hand, defamation prevailed over substantive discussion (BVerfGE 93, 266 [293 ff.; 303 ff.]).

This reconstruction warrants a limited and, for that very reason, useful conclusion. The Court did not measure the statement's contribution to public debate; it did not assert that soldiers are murderers or that the pacifist position is correct. It established that the expression was protected, that its ambiguity should have been resolved in favour of the reading most favourable to freedom, and that the judges could not replace specific balancing with a hasty classification. In other words, the decision establishes a legal point. It establishes that the convictions could not stand on those grounds. It does not establish, nor did it seek to establish, what the statement demonstrates about the world or what occurs when it ceases to be a pacifist intervention in a particular context and becomes the summary of an identity.

Here arises the question that case law does not answer, because doing so is not its function. What was legally protected does not explain why a statement is repeated, appropriated by other speakers or employed to define another person in their entirety. The question is not whether the state should prohibit labels — constitutional tradition answers no, except in narrow circumstances — but at what point, in a public dispute, the label begins to take the place of the subject; and it belongs to the level of circulation and reuse of speech, which the next section examines.

2. From television to social media: the contemporary circulation of political speech

The protection of speech and the means of its circulation do not lie on the same level, and moving from one to the other requires historical caution. It would be easy, and false, to tell the story of a rational square that social media supposedly turned into a trench. Three analytical moves avoid this error.

The first recalls that the press and television were already constructing characters, agendas and performances before digital platforms. In his lectures on television, Bourdieu described how the medium's urgency favours fast-thinkers, thinkers capable of answering in seconds because they think through ready-made ideas, already accepted by the public and therefore exempt from demonstration (BOURDIEU, 1997, p. 38-41). The point is not that quick answers are false; it is that the format selects certain formulas and rewards them with visibility. Manin, in turn, showed that representative democracy had already moved, before the internet,

from a party model to an “audience democracy”, in which candidates address voters directly through television and the choices presented to the public become central, as does the candidates' image (MANIN, 1997, ch. 6). Anyone idealising the public sphere before platforms ignores that the selection of visibility, staged confrontation and reduction of the adversary to a recognisable type were established practices of media politics, and that gatekeepers had interests of their own.

The second move describes what hybrid communication added. Chadwick proposed the concept of a hybrid system precisely to prevent the replacement thesis: the logics of older and newer media do not succeed one another but intertwine, compete and adapt, so that a television interview is excerpted and commented on across platforms, the excerpt returns to television as news, and politicians, journalists, influencers and ordinary publics contest the framing of the episode in real time (CHADWICK, 2017). Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal showed that platforms are not neutral channels: they select content through their own mechanisms, turn interactions into data, order visibility according to metrics and shape what appears and disappears (VAN DIJCK; POELL; DE WAAL, 2018, ch. 2). There are new filters — algorithms, professional communication teams, moderation, social selection through sharing — in place of the old ones, not an absence of filters. Saying that “social media replaced television” does not describe this environment; it describes a caricature of it.

The third move bears directly on the problem. The hybrid environment enables participants who do not control the medium, and without the professional mediation television required, to reapply the same representation to different events — a condition adjacent to that which allows digital visibility to be converted into presumed political aptitude (DIETRICH, 2026). A thirty-second video extracted from an hour-long speech; a comment assigning meaning to the excerpt; a captioned image linking today's episode to yesterday's characterisation; a reply that does not discuss the excerpted content but reaffirms who the author “is”. Each operation is trivial; their sum produces something structurally different from mass television: maintaining a narratively stable representation, into which new facts are fitted through posts, memes, short videos or replies, no longer depends on whoever controls the medium. The cut is not, in itself, evidence of distortion — an edited sequence may preserve the original meaning. What the cut enables is selective repetition, a vehicle through which an epithet can reappear, week after week, associated with events that have nothing in common except the actor to whom they refer.

This third move requires a limit that the empirical literature helps establish. Studies of diffusion on particular platforms and in the United States show that content using moral-

emotional language and messages expressing animosity towards the opposing group tend to circulate more widely and generate more interactions (BRADY et al., 2017; RATHJE; VAN BAVEL; VAN DER LINDEN, 2021). These findings measure shares, reactions and reach; they do not measure belief, changes in voting or adherence. The presence of a post proves that it was produced; its number of shares proves that it circulated; neither proves that those who shared it interpreted it in a particular way, took it as true or began to act accordingly. Circulation is not reception, and evidence of diffusion is not evidence of conviction. Nor does similarity between posts by different users demonstrate coordination: people who share the same vocabulary may do so out of conviction, imitation, habit or irony, and distinguishing these cases requires data that observation of circulation does not provide.

The reorganisation of media therefore establishes a condition, not an effect. The condition is that a characterisation can now be reapplied to successive events by participants who, in earlier media politics, lacked access to the means of excerpting and distribution. Whether and when this reapplication turns an epithet into a narrative, and a narrative into an answer offered in place of examination, cannot be decided by media analysis. It is decided by the structure of what circulates, and understanding that structure requires turning to the theory of political myth.

3. Manufacturing the adversary: when the label becomes part of a political myth

It is useful to begin with a case invented for the analysis. A legislator votes against a public security bill. This is an event: a recorded, dated, verifiable vote. A commentator states that the legislator “protects criminals”: a judgement that selects one aspect of the event and interprets it as evidence of a disposition. So far there is an epithet, perhaps unfair, perhaps pertinent; determining which would require only examining the bill and the reasons for the vote, and this examination is still possible because the epithet refers to a particular act. Suppose that, months later, the legislator criticises a policing method, proposes a change in progression through prison regimes and votes for a reintegration programme, and that the same characterisation reappears with each episode: “protects criminals”. Suppose, finally, that when asked about the reasons for each position, the answer ceases to examine them and instead reaffirms the characterisation, now as a sufficient explanation for everything the legislator does. The case has changed in nature somewhere along this route; identifying that point is the task.

This requires distinctions that ordinary usage confuses. A verifiable accusation alleges a particular act or fact susceptible to examination; it may be true, false or disputed, and its

gravity does not make it mythical. An epithet condenses the attribution of a characteristic to a person or group; it may function as criticism, satire, hypothesis or insult, and does not, by itself, constitute a myth. A frame selects aspects of an event as relevant or secondary; it may be legitimate, partial or distorted. A narrative connects events and characters in a meaningful sequence. Political myth, in the operational definition adopted here as a synthesis of the authors discussed below, is a shared narrative open to reworking, which integrates events and characters into a recognisable scheme of political meaning and frequently naturalises qualities, threats or promises. Myth is not defined by falsity: its factual elements may be true. It is not defined by repetition: a slogan repeated a thousand times remains a slogan if it does not form part of a story.

Barthes supplied the semiotic operation of naturalisation. In Mythologies, myth is a second-order system of signification: an already complete sign — an image, a statement, a gesture — is taken as the signifier of a new meaning, which presents itself not as interpretation but as self-evidence. In Barthes's formulation, myth presents as nature what is a product of history: what results from choices and contingencies begins to appear as the very constitution of things (BARTHES, 2001, “Myth Today”). In the hypothetical case, the vote is the first-order sign; “protects criminals” is the second-order meaning that absorbs it; and naturalisation occurs when this meaning begins to be presented as what the legislator simply “is”. Barthes explains this operation; he does not explain, nor did he seek to explain, the rejection of arguments before reading them, and attributing a theory of reception to him would distort his work.

Edelman described the articulation of problems, leaders and enemies. In Constructing the Political Spectacle, political problems are not given but constructed; leaders are produced through language that attributes responsibility to them for events they largely do not control; and the characterisation of an enemy can bring distinct issues together under the same actor and displace competing explanations for a public's difficulties (EDELMAN, 1988, p. 68-69). The resulting threat-protector relationship is neither a recent discovery nor a contribution by whoever applies it; it is one of politics' oldest narrative schemes. What matters in Edelman is the function: constructing the enemy serves not only to condemn, but to explain. An explanation already available before a fact occurs can be offered as an answer to it without the fact being examined; whether it is offered, and whether it is accepted, are questions that the construction of the enemy does not decide.

Flood supplied the distinction between ideologically marked political narrative and an isolated slogan. Political myth is, in his account, a narrative that purports to give a truthful account of past, present or predicted political events, bears recognisable ideological markers

and is accepted as valid in its essential elements by a social group (FLOOD, 1996, p. 44 apud BOTTICI, 2007, p. 8-9). The definition has four requirements: narrativity, a claim to truth, ideological marking and acceptance by a group. An epithet does not meet the first; a personal judgement shared by no one else does not meet the fourth. Thus “protects criminals” is not a myth while it remains a reaction to a vote; it becomes one only when it becomes an episode in a story — the legislator who, in everything they do, serves an unlawful interest — told and accepted by a group that regards it as true.

Bottici shifts the problem. The claim to truth, central to Flood's definition, does not, for her, exhaust what is done with a narrative: myth is something done with language rather than something asserted. Taking up the idea of “work on myth”, she describes it as a process — a group's continuous work on a common narrative, through which its members give significance to their political experience (BOTTICI, 2007, p. 8-9; 201-202; BOTTICI; CHALLAND, 2006). Publics participate in retelling, and therefore the “same” myth can acquire incompatible uses without this seeming contradictory to those retelling it. It follows — a synthesis not attributed to Bottici — that myth's coherence lies in continuity of meaning, not in the logical consistency of its applications.

Cassirer is the antecedent to be mentioned briefly: in The Myth of the State, he described modern political myths as products of a technique, manufactured as modern weapons are manufactured (CASSIRER, 2003, ch. XVIII). His context was totalitarianism, and transferring the diagnosis to digital politics would be an unwarranted analogy; what remains is the observation that myths can be deliberately constructed, without every persistent narrative therefore being strategic.

With these instruments, the hypothetical case breaks down into four transitions. In the first, an event: the vote. In the second, selection and judgement: the vote read as protection of criminals. In the third, a global attribution of identity: the legislator is someone who protects criminals. In the fourth, reuse of the scheme in new events: criticism of policing, the proposal on sentences and the vote on the reintegration programme are read as episodes of the same story. The first two transitions produce an epithet; the third produces a general characterisation; the fourth, when accompanied by narrativity, ideological marking and acceptance by a group, shows myth in use as a ready-made answer. Reapplication to new events is not a condition for myth's existence — Flood and Bottici do not require it — or a condition for the narrative replacement of examination, which can occur in a single documented episode, provided the narrative to which the answer belongs is identified. It is, however, the most useful evidence that

a narrative is operating in place of examination, because it shows the same characterisation answering different subjects — and can be asserted only when the sequence is documentable.

What narrative adds to an isolated characterisation can now be stated without exaggeration. A general predicate — “is incompetent”, “is dishonest” — applies to different acts without any narrative; generalisation alone does not make a myth. Narrative relates heterogeneous events under a common political meaning, and characterisation ceases to be an assessment and becomes a role in a story. Edelman had already observed that the figure of the enemy brings different issues together and displaces competing explanations; what is added is a procedure for recognising, in a segment of discourse, when examination is replaced by a narrative characterisation rather than an insult or an isolated accusation.

The distinction rests on two requirements and one additional indicator. The first requirement is narrative integration: the characterisation used in the reply must belong to an identifiable political story that relates events, characters or collectivities under a shared meaning. Markers of continuity — “once again”, “as always” — are insufficient, because someone may say “once again demonstrated incompetence” without referring to any story, merely generalising an assessment. The context must allow the reference to be reconstructed: which events the reply relates, what common meaning it attributes to them, how the characterisation participates in that story. It is not enough that the story be politically intelligible; it must be in use by a group, and evidence of use is documentable retelling, not belief. The circulation of the same characterisation among different speakers who do not restate the argument indicates a shared narrative repertoire; it does not demonstrate that those speakers believe what they repeat, or that recipients consider the answer sufficient. Since Bottici reminds us that myth involves production, reception and reproduction, a series of retellings attests to production and reproduction; reception remains unproven, and this must be stated. The second requirement is discursive replacement: in a particular controversy, the characterisation is used in place of examination of the concrete issue, which is demonstrated by comparing question, answer and context — the subject of the next section. The additional indicator is reinterpretation of contradictions. When contrary evidence is reinterpreted to preserve the characterisation (“it was a disguise”), one must establish whether the elements of this reinterpretation — the role of the dissimulator, the plot of what is concealed — already belonged to the identified narrative or were improvised. Narrative does not make characterisation immune to contradiction; it can supply the material through which contradiction is absorbed, and this is verifiable. But reinterpretation is an additional operation: a narrative can operate as a substitute answer without

any contrary evidence, and a free-standing label can be defended through improvised justifications.

An insufficiency test accompanies the requirements. Someone may call a politician "corrupt" and present pertinent evidence; the epithet then summarises a substantiated allegation, and nothing has been demonstrated about narrative or replacement. A public may maintain a shared story about its representative and still critically examine that representative's decisions. Narrative, where it exists, is a structure of what circulates; it is neither a property of the epithet nor a conclusion about whoever repeats it.

This applies to actual expressions in Brazilian debate. "Bolsonaro is genocidal", "Bolsonaro is corrupt", "Lula is a thief" and "Lula is a communist" are widely circulating terms, and their symmetry here is deliberate. Each may function, depending on context, as a factual or criminal allegation, moral condemnation, hyperbole or narrative element; "communist" may designate an ideological position, a classificatory imprecision or a figure of threat. None is, in itself, a myth, or false or true; none is endorsed or refuted by the analysis. To assert that one of these labels forms part of a shared narrative and is used in place of examination would require assembling the documentary series demanded by the two requirements: complete, dated statements by identified speakers that refer to a reconstructible story and answer particular questions without examining them. Until then, the four expressions are objects of investigation, not demonstrated cases or proven myths. The rigour demanded for the adversary is the same as that demanded for the ally, and an analysis that failed to observe it would reproduce the flaw it describes.

One safeguard remains. The moralised adversary and the saviour are narrative possibilities, not attributes of every political myth; the analysis does not require the threat-enemy-saviour scheme, only shared narrativity — and it is from this, not from the story's moral content, that the availability of the answer whose use the next section describes derives.

4. When the label takes the place of the subject

Displacement of the subject is an observable discursive occurrence, and it is useful to describe it before explaining it. Its minimal format is as follows. There is an open question calling for examination of content: why did the legislator vote against the bill? What did the bill provide? What reasons did the legislator give? In reply, an identity is delivered: the legislator voted against it because they protect criminals. And there is an observable consequence: the question about the bill, the vote and the reasons remains unexamined in that

reply, not because it has been answered, but because the attributed characterisation has been presented as if it rendered the answer unnecessary. The reason for the decision is not investigated; it is deduced from who made it.

The change of object can be shown discursively through a second hypothetical example, likewise identified as such. A female mayor reduces spending on a social programme. The question is asked what motivated the reduction: falling revenue, restructuring, reallocation to another policy, a negative assessment of results. An adversary posts: “she hates the poor”. The post can be read in three ways. As a moral conclusion derived from the act — in which case it goes beyond the act described, because reducing spending on a programme is compatible with many dispositions towards its beneficiaries. As a hypothesis to be verified — in which case the debate can still return to the subject. Or as the application of an already established characterisation, of which the act is merely further confirmation — in which case the question about motivation has been replaced by reaffirmation of who the mayor “is”. Even in the first reading, examination may be replaced: an isolated accusation also produces this, without any narrative. The third is the one that may exemplify the form investigated here, provided it is demonstrated that the characterisation meets the requirement of narrative integration. The example does not demonstrate an intention to manipulate; it illustrates how a characterisation integrated into a narrative can be offered in place of examination of the reasons for a decision.

What these examples make visible is a change of object: the reply does not answer the question about the reason for the act; it asserts something about the actor. If the shift persists, the discussion comes to concern that assertion — observable when subsequent replies discuss the characterisation rather than the bill. In this shift, the same label may be offered as a reading of mutually incompatible decisions: a vote for harsher sentences “is a disguise”, while a vote against them “shows who they are”. A characterisation presented as confirmed by any decision is being tested by none. This is the clearest feature of accomplished replacement — a feature of the statement, not an effect on its reader — and it is where the previous section's additional indicator applies: when contradiction is absorbed, one must determine whether the role and plot absorbing it were already in the story.

Here it is essential to separate three levels of evidence. Evidence of production establishes that a statement existed: who uttered it, when, in which medium, and with what complete content. Evidence of circulation establishes that the statement was reproduced: by how many, in which formats and with what reach. Evidence of reception establishes how the statement was understood and whether it changed beliefs, assessments or conduct: this requires data of another kind — interviews, experiments, purpose-designed opinion surveys — that

identifying posts does not supply. A documented conversation in which a question about the bill receives the proponent's characterisation as its answer demonstrates replacement in that episode; a thousand shares demonstrate that it circulated. Neither demonstrates that the electorate began to think that way, that the campaign intended that effect or that national debate was destroyed. Whoever jumps from the first level to the third claims more than they know.

To understand why a prior narrative can guide the interpretation of later events, a circumscribed reference to the psychology of motivated reasoning is sufficient. Kunda showed that different goals — reaching an accurate conclusion or reaching a desired conclusion — mobilise different cognitive strategies, and that the second goal biases the search for and assessment of evidence without the subject ceasing to feel that they reason impartially (KUNDA, 1990). In experiments on political beliefs, Taber and Lodge documented motivated scepticism: participants rated arguments congruent with their prior attitudes as stronger, devoted more time and effort to refuting incongruent arguments and, when free to choose, preferentially sought information confirming what they already thought, with the result that exposure to balanced arguments increased rather than reduced attitude polarisation, especially among participants with stronger prior convictions and greater political sophistication (TABER; LODGE, 2006).

These findings warrant one precise claim and rule out another. They warrant saying that selective evaluation — receiving an argument but applying different standards according to its source or position — is a plausible mechanism through which a previously attributed characterisation can organise the reading of new facts; and that selective exposure — not encountering the opposing argument — is a complementary mechanism. They rule out saying that this occurred in any particular Brazilian episode, because the experiments involved other subjects, in another context and on other topics, and no reception research on the labels mentioned here has been examined. Psychology supplies the possibility; it does not supply the data. Nor does possibility amount to a theory of the manipulable voter: summarising is not an inability to reason, choosing a source in advance is not inherently irrational, and a voter may have substantive reasons, grounded in a documented record, for reading someone's actions suspiciously. There is a difference between selecting information, legitimate distrust and refusal without examination; only the third attitude constitutes displacement.

A final caution concerns the excerpt. When analysing an episode, one must ask whether the sequence is complete or has been created through editing. An answer that seems merely to reaffirm the actor's identity may have been preceded by an examination of the bill omitted from the excerpt; a question that seems open may have been rhetorical. The trace — the screenshot,

short video or partial transcript — is not the event, and treating it as such is to commit, in the analysis, the error attributed to the discourse under analysis. Documentary criticism requires identifying who produced the record, whether it is complete, what the question was and which answer was omitted. Only then is it legitimate to assert that, in that episode, the label took the place of the subject. What this description establishes is the form of replacement and the proof it requires; what it does not establish is its frequency or effect.

5. The trench is not the whole square: scope and limits of the critique

The strongest objection deserves to be formulated with its full force, because it is largely correct. Harsh criticism may be fair. A serious accusation — of corruption, violation of rights or abuse of power — may be true, and when it is, it demands accountability, not reflection on narratives. A persistent campaign against a public official may prompt investigations that would otherwise never occur. Indignation and satire illuminate: they reveal what official language conceals and mobilise those whom neutral argument would leave indifferent. Collective narratives sustain the political participation of groups that would otherwise lack a voice, and political disagreement is not a defect to be remedied but the normal condition of any plural society. A square without passion would be a square without politics.

Contemporary political theory grounds this objection. Mouffe argued that conflict is not a pathology of democracy but its constitutive dimension: the democratic task is not to eliminate antagonism but to turn it into agonism, so that the opponent is treated as an adversary — someone whose ideas are fought but whose right to defend them is not questioned — rather than an enemy to be destroyed (MOUFFE, 2005). Young showed that demanding exclusively argumentative and dispassionate debate excludes modes of communication — greeting, rhetoric, narrative — through which marginalised groups express experiences that abstract argument fails to capture, and that narrative in particular has democratic value of its own as a way of making a situation intelligible to those who do not experience it (YOUNG, 2000, p. 52-80). Fraser recalled that the bourgeois public sphere was never the neutral space it was assumed to be, and that counterpublics, with vocabularies of their own, were necessary for certain claims even to be formulated (FRASER, 1990, p. 67-68). Identity and trust are, moreover, inevitable and often rational shortcuts: no one re-examines the decision-maker's entire trajectory with every decision, and a label can abbreviate a familiar argument without dispensing with it.

All this is conceded, and the concession delimits the target rather than dissolving it. What has been described is not harsh criticism, serious accusation, indignation, satire, collective

narrative or antagonism. It is a narrower operation: the use of a characterisation that interrupts examination of the concrete issue — answering the question about the bill with the proponent's identity and treating that answer as sufficient. Mouffe's distinction between adversary and enemy is useful to the argument here. For Mouffe, the adversary is the legitimate opponent who shares the ethical-political principles of liberty and equality but disagrees over their interpretation; the enemy is someone whose claim to participate is not recognised (MOUFFE, 2005). Without equating these categories with the criterion constructed here, one can observe a parallel discursive feature: the adversary's proposals are still examined; the enemy's characterisation already answers for them. The narrative Young defends makes a situation intelligible; the narrative mobilised by replacement is presented as if it made examination unnecessary. The shortcut abbreviating a familiar argument presupposes that the argument exists and can be reopened; the substitute answer presents the characterisation as sufficient for the issue under discussion without demonstrating its relevance to the concrete event. Whether later events will be examined, reinterpreted or ignored is a distinct question that the mere existence of narrative does not resolve.

The necessary counterexample confirms the delimitation. Suppose there is a severe factual accusation — a politician received an improper benefit in a particular contract — accompanied by pertinent documents, presented with reasons and kept open to refutation. In this case, the epithet “corrupt” summarises a substantiated allegation; the narrative that may form around it can generate substantive investigation; and if the accusation is true, the resulting accountability is no displacement of anything but the very function of public criticism. Nothing said here warrants redefining this case as a “harmful myth” for analytical convenience. What distinguishes it from narrative replacement is neither the accusation's severity, nor its persistence, nor the accompanying emotion, but the fact that the accusation remains tied to particular acts and open to examination: if the same politician acts in a later decision in a way that contradicts it, the contradiction can be seen — and what will be observed then is whether it is examined or narrated as yet another episode.

Hence the restricted result. Certain narratives can displace a particular controversy from its object, and documented excerpts make it possible to recognise when this happens. It does not follow that emotional participation is a defect, that antagonism is regression or that the public square has generally been turned into a trench. The trench is a place within the square, not the entire square; and the analysis identifying it does not warrant a diagnosis that the square has disappeared.

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Conclusion — The square and the trench

The legal protection of radical speech is an achievement, and nothing presented here calls it into question. In overturning the convictions over Tucholsky's phrase, the German Federal Constitutional Court did not say that soldiers are murderers; it said that the convictions could not stand on those grounds, that non-offensive readings of an ambiguous statement must be excluded on reasoned grounds before any conviction, and that defamation cannot be presumed from criticism of a social function. The decision establishes a legal point: the most offensive interpretation of an ambiguous phrase does not suffice, by itself, to close the square. It does not establish what each statement demonstrates about the world, or exempt the public from asking.

This is the distinction reached, to be stated without broadening the diagnosis. Protecting speech is different from justifying the inference drawn from it. A verifiable accusation refers to an act and remains open to examination. An epithet condenses an attribution and can summarise an argument or replace it. A political myth, in the sense that Flood and Bottici allow us to establish, is a shared, reiterated and reworked narrative; what it adds to an isolated accusation is not the generality of the label, which any epithet possesses, but the integration of different events into a story giving them a common political meaning — and it is this integration that makes the characterisation usable as an answer to subjects not yet examined. The narrative replacement of the subject occurs when this available answer is given to questions it has never examined. It is a discursive occurrence identifiable in delimited episodes by comparing the initial question, the answer given and the issue left unexamined; it is not a state of the electorate, a property of social media or a destiny of democracy.

Contemporary circulation puts this operation within the reach of participants who do not control the medium, without the mediation mass television required, because excerpting, reapplication and reply are now actions available to anyone wishing to perform them. But access is a condition, not an effect, and evidence that something circulated is not evidence that someone believed it. Psychology explains why a prior characterisation can guide the reading of new facts; it does not demonstrate that this has occurred in any unstudied case. Expressions familiar to Brazilian debate therefore remain objects of investigation, subject to the same criterion whatever the political camp they target — and the two requirements established here indicate what would need to be assembled to examine them.

What remains is a question, addressed to those participating in the square, not those regulating it. Faced with a label — any label, directed at anyone — the question is whether it still refers to something examinable or already answers for everything. In the first case, criticism, however harsh, remains criticism. In the second, the square, at that point and at that moment, has become a trench: a place from which an identity is fired upon, and where the subject, which was the reason for being there, has ceased to be seen. Recognising that moment requires neither censorship nor nostalgia for a square that never existed. It requires only a willingness to ask, before answering, what the discussion was about.

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