

CRISIS AND RUPTURE: BOLSONARISM AND ITS EFFECTS AMONG JEWS IN RIO DE JANEIRO

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Abstract

Desde 2013, o Brasil tem visto um notável fortalecimento dos movimentos e partidos de extrema direita. Esse processo atingiu seu ápice em 2018, com a eleição de Jair Bolsonaro como presidente do república. Como parte deste processo, os bolsonaristas e a extrema-direita brasileira em geral têm feito uso significativo de símbolos, elementos e narrativas relacionadas ao Judaísmo e ao estado de Israel. Para estas forças políticas, Israel, o sionismo e os judeus são elementos representantes do ultraconservadorismo e da direita radical que ganhava destaque no cenário brasileiro e no mapa político local. A apropriação destes símbolos e narrativas pela política para propósitos políticos da direita radical no Brasil se baseia em significados históricos inconsistentes e fragmentados e acabou por produzir uma

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grave crise e ruptura na coletividade judaica do Brasil. Parte dessa crise será analisada no presente artigo

Palabras chaves: Extrema-Direita, Sionismo, Judaísmo, Brasil

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Introduction

When Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil in 2018, it had become clear that his candidacy represented a danger to Brazil's recent and still fragile democracy. Although exhibiting characteristics consistent with those of other global leaders from the "New Right"³ that had emerged in so-called liberal democracies, Bolsonaro's qualities were also deeply rooted in Brazil's social and political history. Further, his belligerent discourse focused more on mythologizing the Brazilian past and the fight against "political correctness" than on a programmatic political project.

Evidently, the defense of his agendas, such as promoting a positive memory of the military dictatorship and torture, would not resonate with Brazilian society unless it were predisposed to accept them. In his studies

- 3 We use the term "New Right" here in a general sense, as proposed by Vera Alves Capêda, to define the process of constructing a new conservative political identity that has emerged and solidified in Brazil in recent years. Capêda describes a conservative political space where right-wing groups coexist across a variety of orientations ranging from liberal to those that flirt with historical fascisms. In this sense, the Brazilian "New Right" seeks to create a "political community" that seeks to vanquish "petismo" (the political movement associated with the Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT or Workers' Party of the former president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva) and fight an "imaginary left." Having different relations with power, political culture, liberalism, and democracy, there are radical right, far right, and liberal right groups that have survived during specific moments in the nation's political history. Over time, certain groups have become hegemonic, while others have collapsed. This Brazilian "New Right" is diverse and filled with contradictions but serves as an initial ideological boundary. See Vera A. Cepêda, "A Nova Direita no Brasil: Contextos e Matizes Conceituais", *Mediações-Revistas de Ciências Sociais* 2 (2018): 41-74.

on memory and history, Michael Pollak has argued that the boundaries between the sayable and the unsayable, and between what is said and what is left unsaid, are far less permanent than they might appear since memories are constantly being contested.⁴ Since the past is continuously being created and recreated in the shadows, out of sight of the public sphere, the narratives, metaphors, and images that inform this view of the past are also subjected to interpretations and reinterpretations. Through this process, familiar signifiers also acquire new meanings.

Thus, tracing the rise to power of Bolsonarism also involves mapping the path of the discourse and the signs and symbols that have been reinterpreted by a new political culture that emerged before Bolsonaro's 2018 ascent to the presidency. The so-called *jornadas de junho* (June journeys), the massive political demonstrations across the nation in June 2013, were quickly appropriated by the Right, and strengthened by the impeachment campaign against President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, leading to a new political Right appearing in the streets. Alongside this New Right, a new collective memory was constructed, which was accompanied by the pervasive use of the national flag and anthem, a military aesthetic, and the yellow shirts of the Brazilian national football team. Among the symbols deployed in these street protests, we are compelled to analyze one in particular: the flag of Israel.

Given that the Jewish population represents a very small fraction of the Brazilian population, the presence of this symbol at such events should not be attributed to a significant participation of Jews, nor is it evidence of "dual loyalties," as is frequently asserted in antisemitic discourse that accuses Jews of "cosmopolitanism." In these demonstrations, the Israeli flag represents something other than a nationalist expression of support for the Jewish state. In this new Brazilian political context, these flags have acquired other ideological meanings. This panorama has captured our attention, and in the following pages, we seek to provide interpretations that will illuminate the current situation.

4 Michael Pollak, "Memória, esquecimento, silêncio", *Revista estudos históricos* 2/3 (1989): 3-15.

The following essay is a reflection based on our ongoing collaborative research. As a historian and an anthropologist, respectively, we focus our scholarly efforts on Jewish themes within the context of Brazilian society. Through our research, we aim to explore themes connected to Judaism and Jewish identity within the political, social, and economic realities of Brazil. As such, we seek to study the Brazilian Jewish community within a broader perspective, integrated in rather than independent from the national issues that affect the Jewish community in the country.⁵

Here, we reflect on Jewish sociability within the framework of the country's contemporary political landscape. We take as our starting point the above-mentioned appearance of Israeli flags as well as other Jewish symbols in demonstrations and activities of groups associated with the Brazilian "New Right."⁶ Our interest is thus to reflect on the *political* uses that these groups make of Jewish and Israeli symbols. It is crucial to recognize the specific time frame associated with the use of these symbols; they emerged alongside the rise of conservative forces in the country. As stated, these symbols began to gain prominence during the huge demonstrations, which occurred in major Brazilian cities in June 2013.⁷

On these occasions, conservative and far-right groups appropriated these symbols to represent ideological positions that they tied to these newly reconfigured "political artifacts."⁸ These groups associated Israel,

5 Regarding the shift from the idea of Brazilian identity as national identity to the discourse of Brazilian identity as a polysemic reference with multiple identities, see Tânia Regina De Luca, *A Revista do Brasil: Um Diagnóstico para a (N)ação*, São Paulo 1999.

6 Cepêda (see note 3).

7 We refer here to the onset of the large-scale protests that occurred in Brazil in 2013. Although they initially began modestly and with a very specific focus, that is, protesting public transportation services, they soon expanded and evolved into mass protests against institutional politics in the broadest sense. See Michel Gherman and Misha Klein, "Entre 'conversos' e 'desconversos': o caso da influência da Nova Direita Brasileira sobre a comunidade judaica do Rio de Janeiro", *Estudios Sociales del Estado* 5/9 (2019): 108-113.

8 Langdon Winner. *The Whale and the Reactor – A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*, Chicago 1986.

Zionism, and Jews with ultraconservatism and the radical right that was gaining prominence in the Brazilian political landscape.

Here, we wish to raise an important point from the perspective of Jewish Studies. It seems that the groups that carried Israeli flags and Jewish symbols in these protests in 2013 included few if any Jews (in the broader and more traditional sense of the term).⁹ However, by 2018, the majority of the Brazilian Jewish community voted for Jair Bolsonaro, the presidential candidate for the PSL (*Partido Social Liberal*, the Social Liberal Party).¹⁰ Nevertheless, this shift was also accompanied by a significant countermovement within the community in opposition to this candidate and in favor of democracy.

This scenario presents challenges for researchers in the field of Jewish Studies in Brazil and suggests the beginning of a new phase for this discipline in Brazil, as indicated by the following questions that guide us throughout this article: How should we handle symbols and references that delineate the boundaries of Brazilian Jewish identities when they are appropriated by groups that are, at least initially, outside these boundaries? How can we understand the division, at times extreme and violent, between these “new Zionists” and those groups “historically associated with Zionism”?¹¹

9 We refer here to ethnic and cultural perspectives that defined the boundaries of Jewish identity in the 19th and 20th centuries. In this sense, we refer to members of broader communities, sharing a common (if imaginary) origin and enjoying real or potential institutional belonging. In other words, we refer to self-identification and the possibility of social-community identification. See Bernardo Sorj, “Sociabilidade Brasileira e Identidade Judaica,” in Nilton Bonder & Bernardo Sorj, *Judaísmo para o século XXI: o rabino e o sociólogo*, Rio de Janeiro 2010.

10 Simone Intrator, “Comunidade judaica racha no apoio a Bolsonaro,” <<https://projeto colabora.com.br/ods9/comunidade-judaica-racha-no-apoio-a-bolsonaro/?amp=1>> (accessed: 09/06/2024.)

11 Here, we refer to the Zionist logics typical of European modernity that gave rise to the range of Jewish identities present in Brazil. Thus, from socialist Zionism to groups associated with (right-wing) revisionism or religious Zionism, all may be seen as members of a broader ethno-political community. Despite serious internal disputes, they mutually legitimized each other’s Judaism and Zionism. Historically, there was no ethno-cultural rejection based on political and ideological positions. See Michel Gherman, *O Início do Sionismo no Brasil: Ambiguidades da História (1900-1930)*, São Paulo 2018.

How are we to understand ideological and political identities that have superseded the traditional ethno-cultural references of the various Jewish groups established in the country?

Jewish Studies and the New Right in Brazil

In this article, as noted above, our intention is to offer preliminary reflections on the political, ideological, social, and cultural transformations that have unfolded in Brazil since 2013, from the perspective of Jewish Studies. In contrast to what had transpired up to that point, Zionist and Jewish identities have increasingly been politically mobilized by groups who were not historically connected to this repertoire of symbols. Specifically, groups of “new Zionists”¹² or “new Jews”¹³ are appropriating traditional references to Zionism and Judaism for political purposes in public demonstrations in Brazil.

It is important to note that the absence of “historical Jews”¹⁴ among those who employ Jewish and Israeli symbols to politically identify themselves does not prevent us from using the conceptual and methodological framework of Jewish Studies to analyze these emerging phenomena in Brazilian politics. Towards this end, a brief overview of this field of study in Brazil is warranted.

Haim Avni,¹⁵ considered the father of contemporary Jewish Latinoamerican Studies, is one of the most significant figures in the

12 Uri Ram, “Why Secularism Fails? Secular Nationalism and Religious Revivalism in Israel, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 21 (2008): 57-73.

13 This definition is related to the *rapprochement* of right-wing groups with Judaism. Some of these groups are: Evangelical, others messianic, while even non-religious groups appropriate Jewish symbols solely for ideological reasons. See Bila Sorj. “Conversões e Casamentos ‘Mistos’: A Produção de ‘novos judeus’ no Brasil”, in Sorj Bila (ed.), *Identidades judaicas no Brasil contemporâneo*, Rio de Janeiro 1997.

14 We use the historical concept here to establish connections with major Jewish currents of modernity, such as Zionism, socialism, liberalism, etc. See Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, Cambridge 2004.

15 Haim Avni, *Judíos en América: cinco siglos de história*, Madrid 1992.

field in Brazil. Avni explores the connections between immigration and community formation. As clearly demonstrated by several studies, Jews in Brazil established communities in a society where assimilation was both possible and desirable,¹⁶ and where, shortly after immigration, ethnic and cultural references were subordinated to practices that were predominantly religious and spiritual. By the second generation, following immigration, as linguistic and cultural barriers gradually disappeared, Judaism in Brazil became a predominantly cultural experience.¹⁷

Another significant aspect of Jewish Studies draws on both temporality and memory. In multiple ways, Jews establish what Enzo Traverso¹⁸ calls “communities of memory” in their countries of settlement. In Brazil, for instance, the experience of “Marrano” Jews, discussed by Anita Novinsky, reveals new temporal forms and connections to memory. In this context, the Inquisition replaces the Holocaust as the primary collective tragedy. Furthermore, the concept of a country without a past, one which positions Brazil as the “country of the future,”¹⁹ has been replaced by a clearer and more secure past. As “Marranos” or “new Jews”²⁰ have (re)connected with Judaism in the 20th and 21st centuries, they have acquired a new past and, in many respects, new possibilities for the future. According to our research,²¹ the “new Jew” that has emerged is not the result of a rejection of Christianity but is rather the result of transcending specific forms of Christianity. In this reimagining, Brazil’s past becomes Jewish,

16 Sorj (see note 13).

17 Misha Klein, *Kosher Feijoada and Other Paradoxes of Jewish Life in São Paulo*, Florida 2012.

18 Enzo Traverso, *O Passado, Modos de Usar: História, Memória e Política*, São Paulo 2012.

19 This term was coined by the Austrian author Stefan Zweig in his book about his second trip to Brazil in 1941. See Stefan Zweig, *Brasil, país do futuro*, Rio de Janeiro 1942.

20 These terms signify constitutive changes in contemporary Jewish identities in Brazil, where ethnic and cultural definitions are being replaced by ideological perspectives. We discuss this topic further below.

21 Michel Gherman & Misha Klein, “Aquela Noite: o lugar da Israel imaginária na nova direita brasileira,” *Revista Antropológicas* 32/2 (2021): 111-140.

to a significant extent, with its own symbols and grammar.²² In this revised Jewish temporality, Jewish modernity is replaced by a distant and mythical Jewish past.

Traditional Jewish Studies are predominantly anchored in the categories outlined above. However, there now appears to be a fundamental disconnection of the foundational elements of Jewish Studies, on the one hand, and the persistent and central presence of Jewish symbols and themes representing the political identity of the new Brazilian Right on the other. The Brazilian context presents the needs for a new subfield within the field of Jewish Studies. To be clear, the relationship at issue is between Judaism and segments of the Right rather than with Brazilian society as a whole. In this form of elective affinity, the values of a mythical and ahistorical Judaism intersect with those of conservative and reactionary perspectives, creating new continuities and alignments.

Thus, it is not Jewish practices that have encouraged these connections, but rather it is imaginings about Judaism and Jewishness (frequently in the form of Israeli national politics). While the New Right wears Stars of David and t-shirts with the logo of the Mossad (Israel's Secret Service), they simultaneously dispense with actual Jews. Conversely, as we are attempting to demonstrate through our research, the "historical Jew" (those who have been historically recognized as such) appears to hamper and ideologically disturb these groups. As such, the descendants of the modern Jewish diaspora are considered less authentically Jewish than are the members of the New Right. This new Brazilian right perceives itself to be the genuine defenders of the values of "Judeo-Christian civilization" which have survived the moral decay engendered by secularism and modernity.²³

Here, ethnic Jews in Brazil, meaning those associated with traditional

22 There is a narrative about a subterranean and silenced past, below the subsequent layers of Christianity and, more specifically, those of Judaism. Judaism thus emerges as a reference of the past and, consequently, offering the possibility of return. See Anita Novisky, "Ser marrano em Minas Colonial," *Revista Brasileira de História* 21/40 (2001): 161-175.

23 Felix Soibelman, Diretor jurídico ASBI (Associação Sionista Brasil Israel), "A esquerda não é credora moral pelo padecimento do Holocausto", <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/10/23/politica/1540304878_516816.html> (accessed: 09.06.2024).

Jewish communities, those who are the children and grandchildren of European and Middle Eastern immigrants, are not regarded as models, references, or original identities to be emulated.²⁴ Instead, these Jews are invited to join the new ideological and political communities that have emerged in the contemporary era of Brazilian politics. The new Jewish elite rejects the values of the left and progressivism and aligns with Jewish and Christian values that are perceived to be continuous with one another. This new political and ideological community employs Judaism and Zionism as foundational and accepts ethnic Jews as members in this new community provided they adopt its principles and values.

Jews and the Brazilian New Right: Internal and External

In consideration of these political and cultural shifts, the June 2013 protests serve as a kind of foundational moment for the consolidation of this “New Right” in Brazil.²⁵ Dialectically, this also appears to be the moment that a new deeply conservative form of Judaism takes shape and begins to align itself with the Brazilian far-right. This new “right-wing Judaism” seems to have emerged in the second decade of the 21st century and makes use of Jewish symbols in ways that are similar to how the Brazilian “New Right” tends to employ them.²⁶

In this new conservative grammar, the blue-and-white flag with the

24 This is despite the fact that they were never models to be followed. The “imaginary Jew” is what has become the source of inspiration and imitation. See Gherman & Klein (note 21).

25 In our research, we are considering the complex consolidation of conservative groups in the country that had been politically developing for years before the 2013 protests. We are particularly interested in understanding the right’s reactions to the processes of racialization in Brazilian society, specifically the reactions of the radical right to the outcomes of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerances held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. See Andreas Hofbauer, “Ações afirmativas e o debate sobre racismo no Brasil. Índice”, *Lua Nova* 68 (2006): 9-56. See Gherman & Klein (note 21), 111-140.

26 Cepêda (see note 3).

Star of David, for instance, comes to symbolize not the modern nation of Israel but the supposed values of the “New Right” in Brazil.²⁷ In this framing, modern Israel, like any nation-state, is viewed with skepticism. It is conservative values that are of interest. Judaism is established as the civilizational (armed) barrier against a pacifist danger, standing as a symbol of Western civilization against the expansion of Islam.²⁸ This view of Israel is more aligned with the ancient Kingdom of Solomon than with the modern State of Israel. In other words, a certain Judeo-Christian civilizational morality stands in for a more complex political culture. So, the Israeli flag may appear to bear the same signifier but can acquire profoundly different meanings depending on the context.

On the one hand, the far right deploys Jewish and Israeli symbols while often dispensing with Jewish individuals. On the other hand, there are groups of Jews who are beginning to participate in the Brazilian “New Right.”²⁹ Israeli flags, which were already present at demonstrations, are increasingly in the company of members of Jewish communities who seem to feel comfortable alongside these familiar symbols, however much their meanings may be altered.

As we have said, the process of the consolidation of the New Right in Brazil began in 2013 and progressed up to the election of Jair Messias Bolsonaro in 2018. After 2016 with the protests for the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, Bolsonaro established himself as a clear representative of the conservative agendas.³⁰ These political transformations accompanied certain socio-economic trends. Generally speaking, those

27 Ibidem. Also, we note a parallel use of Jewish and Israeli symbols to signal extreme right-wing positions and identities in other national contexts, including the United States.

28 Michel Gherman, *O não judeu judeu e a tentativa de colonização do judaísmo pelo bolsonarismo*, Rio de Janeiro 2022.

29 There are three main sectors of the Jewish community that have supported Bolsonarism and the far right in Brazil: members of the Jewish Federations, especially in the state of Rio de Janeiro; independent groups within the community; and youth movements established since 2013.

30 Stephanie Assaf, “Linguagens da cidade: entre democracias, autoritarismos e fascismos”, Tese de doutorado, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2024.

electoral groups with higher incomes, and those who were White, male, and residing in the wealthiest neighborhoods of Brazil's major cities were the most loyal and vocal supporters of the president in 2018.³¹

When we consider the city of São Paulo, for example, within the upper middle-class socio-economic sector there are more Whites than Blacks, more Christians than Muslims (for example), and a higher level of education over those with a lower level of education. Within this socio-economic group, there are common practices in spite of the differences among its members. These practices relate to consumption patterns, the cultivation of values, and, as research indicates, the emergence of a new political identity. Consequently, despite broader ethnic data suggesting that votes for Bolsonaro were predominantly among Whites rather than Blacks, we can infer that higher-income Black individuals voted for Bolsonaro more than lower-income Blacks in the 2018 election.

Cross-sectional analyses of religion and social class reveal similar patterns among voters, such as among middle-class Muslims (despite Bolsonaro's Islamophobic remarks)³² or even upper-middle-class practitioners of Candomblé in Brazilian cities.³³ Therefore, if we consider the intersections of religious identity and socio-economic class, we will generally observe that wealthier individuals, regardless of religious or cultural affiliations, voted more for the far-right candidate in 2018 than for the other candidates.

31 According to a survey by the Datafolha Institute, in the 2018 runoff election, among White, urban voters with incomes above the minimum wage, 62% intended to vote for Bolsonaro while 31% intended to vote for Fernando Haddad. See *Datafolha*, 25.10.2018, for president by gender, age, education, income, region, religion, and sexual orientation. G1 Portal, 10/26/18; <<https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/eleicao-em-numeros/noticia/2018/10/26/datafolha-de-25-de-outubro-para-presidente-por-sexo-idade-escolaridade-renda-regiao-religiao-e-orientacao-sexual.ghtml>> (accessed: 09.06.2024).

32 Gêssica Brandino. "Apoio à Bolsonaro divide comunidade islâmica no Brasil", <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2018/11/apoio-a-bolsonaro-divide-comunidade-islamica-no-brasil.shtml>> (accessed 09.06.2024).

33 As a whole, this religious group voted against Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections, according to the aforementioned Datafolha survey.

It is in light of these patterns at the intersection of class and religious identity that we consider certain segments of the Jewish community in the city of Rio de Janeiro, that is, groups of Jewish activists on the far-right in Brazilian politics.³⁴ Many of these groups joined Bolsonaro supporters, who emerged on the Brazilian political scene in 2017.³⁵ It is important to mention that these groups have a kind of dual affiliation when it comes to political activism. They engage in different practices within and outside of the Jewish community of Rio de Janeiro, as will be discussed below.

Within the broader society, groups predominantly comprised of Jews reproduce the same logics observed among the dominant sectors of urban middle-class populations. As previously discussed, middle-class Brazilian groups have shifted to the right by adopting liberal economic policies but prioritizing conservative social values.³⁶

Unsurprisingly, right-wing Jews have reproduced the same processes and dynamics observed among the non-Jewish Brazilian right. Just as segments of the Brazilian middle-class have aligned themselves with this new reactionary right, Jews, who are part of the same urban middle-class, have adopted these positions in similar proportions. Initially, ultraconservative and ultraliberal, they later coalesced around support for Jair Bolsonaro's candidacy.³⁷

In terms of class and race, broad sectors of the Jewish community have replicated internally the same phenomena that their non-Jewish neighbors have exhibited outwardly. Through a complex process of identity reformulation, the middle classes have abandoned historically conciliatory

34 See note 29.

35 The coordination of these conservative Jewish groups, such as the "Amigos" group on Facebook, emerged out of the 2013 protests. This is a group that is closed to non-members.

36 This was the definition given by one of the prominent pre-candidates of the so-called "New Brazilian Right" for the presidency of the Republic, João Amoedo. See Estadão, "João Amoedo se diz liberal na economia, mas conservador nos costumes", <<https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/eleicoes,joao-amodo-se-diz-liberal-na-economia-mas-conservador-nos-costumes,70002318886>> (accessed 07.21.2018).

37 As seen in the 2018 *Datafolha* survey, the votes of Jews in 2018 were similar to those of non-Jewish members of the urban middle-class.

positions, typical of the previously consolidated Brazilian identity, and have adopted a posture favoring rupture and confrontation.³⁸ In this new political grammar, the veneer of “Brazilian cordiality” has been replaced by a form of “acute rudeness.”

Both verbal and physical violence have spread across all social strata in Brazil. Distrust, intolerance, and betrayal have become qualities that are celebrated by the new right-wing that cultivates a form of “sincerity” (or “*sincericídio*,” that is death by sincerity), or destructive honesty.³⁹ The much-celebrated cordiality has been discarded, and replaced by “brutality.”⁴⁰ In such an environment, debates turn into confrontations, alterity becomes exclusion, and political disagreements take on the tone of perpetual enmity.

For the groups of the Brazilian New Right, the moment has arrived for the formation of a new “political community.” This community is no longer structured by an “inclusive and minimally hierarchical sociability,”⁴¹ but rather through constant loyalty tests and the exclusion of specific groups. Leftists, gays, communists, and a range of other categories are blocked from entering this new community which has emerged out of a utopian vision of social purification and a society without conflict that is promoted by the Brazilian New Right. The conception of Brazil as the country of the future, in which the past and certain identities are considered unimportant, has been replaced by radical “regressivism”⁴² in which a return to an idealized past is the core ideological foundation for these groups.

A significant portion of Brazilian Jews belong to the same urban middle sectors that have embraced conservative agendas and voted for Bolsonaro.

38 Bila Sorj, *Identidades judaicas no Brasil contemporâneo*, Rio de Janeiro 1997.

39 Ibidem

40 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolítica*, São Paulo 2018.

41 Sorj (see note 38).

42 Here, we chose to use the concept of “regressivist” instead of “reactionary.” This term was typical of the Regency period in Brazil (1831-1840), when the regressivist party sought greater centralization of power and fought against the alleged “anarchy” of the provinces. To us, this term seems to better describe the desire for “regress” (return or revert), in opposition to the “progress,” as espoused by groups on the Brazilian New Right.

It is therefore understandable that, in keeping with the general trend within the Brazilian population, they align with the same political and ideological positions that appeal to their non-Jewish counterparts. However, we are interested not only in the general motivations that lead Brazilian Jews to align with the “radical right”⁴³ in the country. We are also interested in the ideological and political references of the New Right that end up affecting different sectors of the Brazilian Jewish community.

These details make the case of Bolsonaroist Jews in Brazil a subject worthy of analysis. As we have discussed above, the Brazilian New Right engages with symbols and values that are apparently Jewish. The “language of Bolsonaro” includes Israeli flags, Jewish religious symbols, and a distinctively Zionist discourse. Such discourse seduces segments of the Jewish community, which ended up aligning themselves with the radical New Brazilian Right and, subsequently, with Jair Bolsonaro’s candidacy. Segments of the Jewish community were drawn to Bolsonaroism not only because of their belonging to the familiar criteria of class and ethnicity but also because they perceived the candidate to be a purportedly unprecedented “supporter of Israel” in Brazil.

Over and over again, we see that Bolsonaroism has established a particular relationship with Israel and with Jews. The political boundaries of the New Brazilian Right delineate a right-wing discourse that positions them in relation to Israel and Jews. Moreover, considering a “collective memory”⁴⁴ that privileges memories of suffering and persecution, the emergence of a candidate who uses symbols that are very familiar to Brazilian Jews appears to be the realization of a dream, one that seems to address the atavistic fears typical of a Jewishness that sees antisemitism as a tangible and imminent threat, including in Brazil.

Beyond the issues pertinent to Jewish perspectives, such as the use of symbols and discourse typical of Judaism, Jair Bolsonaro is obviously also supported by non-Jewish friends and neighbors. In a certain sense, Jewish

43 Karl Schurster, Ygor Lapsky & Giselda Brito Silva (eds.), *Velhas e Novas Direitas: a Atualidade de uma Polêmica*, Recife 2014.

44 Traverso (see note 18).

supporters of Bolsonaro experience a much-desired sense of belonging to the “majority community.” Upon observing non-Jewish neighbors raising the Israeli flag, using logos of the Israeli army, and even adopting anti-Palestinian and Islamophobic⁴⁵ rhetoric, Brazilian Jews recognize the use of internal categories in the political game. At last, the communities unite. In the imagination of the “Bolsonarist Jew,” these right-wing groups speak the same language, and use the same political dialect.

In Brazil, class, ethnicity, and place of residence are now joined by a grammar of symbols. These Jews not only became Bolsonarists, but Bolsonarists also became quasi-Jewish through a righteous dialectic of identity.⁴⁶ The powerful process that created “new Jews” and “new Bolsonarists” played a crucial role in the electoral process of 2018, as well as after Bolsonaro’s victory. This is a dual process of political and identity conversion, from right-wing Jews to Bolsonarism, on the one hand, and from Bolsonarists to Jewish identity, on the other.

In this process of Bolsonaro supporters collectively aligning with an “imaginary Judaism,”⁴⁷ a new theological-political community of Jewish Bolsonarists has arisen, while simultaneously, we also see the appearance of Bolsonarist Jews. However, leftist, liberal, and pluralist groups simply cannot belong to this newly formed community and must be actively excluded. In the political imagination of the New Right, being Jewish and being leftist are adversarial and exclusive concepts. Jewish Bolsonarist

45 The debate about the relocation of the Brazilian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, as well as, statements on Palestinian terrorism, divided Muslim support for Bolsonaro in Brazil.

46 This phenomenon of attributing qualities, if not quasi-Jewish identities, to non-Jews has precedents, though there is an important distinction. While up until the end of the 20th century it was common within the Jewish community to hear that an employee had become almost Jewish by learning to cook a distinctively Jewish dish, such as gefilte fish, today this idea refers to a political aesthetic rather than to cultural knowledge and practices. In other words, the basis of this new community is not culture or ancestry, but the ideological intersection of politics and theology. See Klein (see note 17).

47 Gherman (see note 28).

values do not align with anything progressive or leftist. As such, it becomes necessary to police the borders of the group identity.

Bolsonaro's frequent statements praising Hitler and Nazism, and negating the Holocaust, have promoted accusations of his being a Nazi sympathizer. In response, Bolsonaro uses the support of certain sectors of the Jewish community and his supposed affinity with Israel and Zionism to falsify these accusations. Thus, Bolsonarism is "sanitized" by the support of Jews who "cleanse" the candidate's image. Though right-wing Jews may sanitize Bolsonaro, Bolsonarism further seeks to purge leftist elements from among Jews in Brazil, ostensibly protecting the community from those who supposedly threaten communal harmony.

As such, in this new political-ideological community, neo-Pentecostal evangelicals and pro-gun activists are included, while pro-Palestinian Jews, leftist Zionists, and liberals are excluded. In a certain sense, an "imaginary Israel," one which is curiously homogeneous and free of contradictions and divisions, excludes the real Israel, which is full of contradictions and conflicts.⁴⁸ We further explore this phenomenon through the experience of Jews in Rio de Janeiro and a key moment in a process we call political and ideological "conversion and disconversion": Bolsonaro's lecture at the Hebraica Club in April 2017.⁴⁹

Conversion and Disconversion: The Hebraica Case

These processes of conversion and disconversion within the new political and ideological community seem to have been consolidated during an event held at a Jewish club, the Hebraica, in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro. Located in the pleasant neighborhood of Laranjeiras, the Hebraica is a club in decline with little relevance to the community calendar. It re-emerged in the city's Jewish life precisely because it was at the center of a political controversy, namely, the invitation extended

48 Gherman & Klein (see note 21).

49 Ibidem.

to the then Federal Deputy Jair Messias Bolsonaro, to deliver a lecture at the club. At that time, Bolsonaro was already gaining prominence as a pre-candidate for the presidency, representing the far-right movement that was gaining ground in Brazil.⁵⁰

The lecture at the club in Rio, which took place in April 2017, was originally supposed to have been delivered months earlier at the homonymous club in São Paulo. Unlike its (unrelated) counterpart in Rio, the Hebraica Club in São Paulo is a major point of reference for the local community.⁵¹ As one of the largest clubs in the country, it has a large membership and a highly sought-after calendar of events and activities. When, in February 2017, the club announced its intention to bring the congressman for a lecture at São Paulo's Hebraica, there were protests from the Jewish community in opposition to the invitation. Petitions and social media posts led the club's president to cancel the lecture, which, as he stated at the time, had been "the result of an individual initiative by club members."⁵² When the vibrant and active club in São Paulo rejected the far-right congressman's lecture, the empty and inactive club in Rio invited him. Having a small membership, the president of the Hebraica in Rio was able to host the lecture despite the pressures exerted by segments of the Jewish community.

So, on the day of the lecture, to use Guy Debord's terminology, a political "spectacle" unfolded on the sidewalk in front of the club in Laranjeiras. Hundreds of protesters outside the club, some wrapped in Israeli flags and others wearing shirts with Hebrew inscriptions, confronted the guests arriving for the lecture, including some who were also carrying Israeli flags. The tense atmosphere frightened passersby and clearly demonstrated to anyone who cared to see that there was a profound rift within the Jewish community.⁵³ The protesters outside the club shouted "fascists" at those

50 Gherman (see note 28).

51 Klein (see note 17).

52 IG São Paulo. "Clube judaico em São Paulo cancela palestra com Jair Bolsonaro", <<https://ultimosegundo.ig.com.br/politica/2017-02-28/jair-bolsonaro.html>> (accessed: 09/06/2024).

53 Some newspapers that covered the event mention a "split within the community"

entering, while those entering the club to attend the lecture yelled “traitors” at those who were protesting outside. This moment was one of the most traumatic episodes in the city’s Jewish life.⁵⁴

On the following day, internal communications from the Jewish Federation and the Israeli Consulate in Rio de Janeiro reported that a *pogrom* had occurred in front of the Jewish club, employing a term that refers to the massacres against Jews organized by Tsarist authorities in Imperial Russia. In other words, community leaders equated a peaceful protest by Jews with a violent and existential threat to the community. In one sense, a community that had promoted narratives of harmony and unity, as Yossi Goldstein reminds us,⁵⁵ saw its internal contradictions publicly exposed during the evening of Bolsonaro’s lecture. If the “pogrom” at the Hebraica club serves as a turning point, establishing itself as a kind of moment of rupture within the Brazilian Jewish community in the face of the phenomenon of Bolsonarism, we must emphasize that it represents merely a peak in a longer and more complex process, a process of *rapprochements* between Jewish sectors and the new Brazilian Right, mediated through the sustained use of Israeli and Jewish symbols.

Extending Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community,”⁵⁶ it was through an imagined version of Israel that a new political community took shape on the streets of Brazil. As seen at the Hebraica club in Rio in 2017, this communal identity extended to some members of the Jewish community, forming a new collective composed of both Jews and non-Jews based on *ideological* premises rather than *ethnic* ones. Reactionaries (whether Jewish or not) were included, while progressives (whether Jewish

over support for Bolsonaro. See Simone Intrator, “Comunidade Judaica racha no apoio a Bolsonaro”, <<https://projetocolabora.com.br/ods9/comunidade-judaica-racha-no-apoio-a-bolsonaro/>> (accessed: 09/06/2024).

54 Gherman (see note 28).

55 Yossi (Jorge) Goldstein, “De Kehilá a Comunidad: Enfoques acerca de la vida comunitaria judía en la Argentina y el Brasil hacia fines del Siglo XX”, Amilat (ed.), *Judaica Latinoamericana V*, Jerusalem 2005, pp. 27-47.

56 Benedict Anderson, *Comunidades imaginadas: reflexões sobre a origem e a difusão do nacionalismo*, São Paulo 2008.

or not) were excluded from this event, and this inside/outside dynamic reproduced that of the emerging new community.

This challenge to the historical presumptions of Jewish Studies inverts what the author Isaac Deutscher proposed when discussing 19th-century European Judaism.⁵⁷ Deutscher argued that Jewish culture was escaping from its religious and traditional ghetto, and giving rise to a revolutionary, secular Jew, which he called a “non-Jewish Jew.” Today, in Brazil, there are groups that lay claim to Jewish culture (one which is conservative, religious, and traditional) without necessarily being Jews themselves. Hence, we must also consider the phenomenon of “Jewish non-Jews.”⁵⁸ We understand this as a paired set of processes, of both conversion and disconversion, not in the religious sense, but with regard to political ideology. While Bolsonaro embraced Israel, many progressive Jews criticized its policies. Evangelicals spoke of the importance of the unification of Jerusalem, while some Jews advocated for the importance of the city’s division. Far-right militants denounced the “leftist conspiracy” attempting to impose “gender ideology” in schools, while the left-wing youth of the community participated in feminist groups and advocated for abortion rights and sexual diversity. The political oppositions further delineated the boundaries between these communities.

From the perspective of the new “community” imagined by the far-right, evangelical and conservative militants were considered insiders, while liberal youths and progressive Jews were seen as outsiders. The former had undergone a process of conversion to Jewishness (that is, placing themselves in the position of representatives of Jewish values), while the latter had been subjected to a process of disconversion by which they were defined as outside the formal community, that is, ideologically transformed into non-Jews. The former represented security for this new Jewish community, while the latter were viewed as a threat. The idea of an “imaginary Israel”⁵⁹ has powerfully reorganized political, ideological, and

57 Isaac Deutscher, *O Judeu Não-Judeu e Outros Ensaios*, Rio de Janeiro 1970.

58 Gherman (see note 28).

59 Ibidem.

religious identities of Jews and non-Jews in Brazil. Bolsonaro's visit to the Hebraica club in Rio de Janeiro served as a rite of passage for the emergence of these new communities and presented a literalization of the insider and outsider status of Bolsonarist Jews inside the club and progressive Jews outside the club.

Conclusion

The rise of the Bolsonarist far-right in Brazilian society has not only ushered in unprecedented levels of violent discourse in the young democracy, but it has also reorganized communities of connection and identity, unraveling a social fabric that had previously seemed enduring. The Brazilian Jewish community has been thrust into the midst of this movement, not only with regard to an ideological and electoral dispute in a stable political environment, but also in the contest over the meanings of Judaism and, more importantly, *Jewishness*.

The introduction of Jewish symbols and categories into a broader civilizational dispute poses a challenge to traditional Jewish Studies in Brazil, which has historically been associated with the integration and identity of the Jewish community, characterized by a strong emphasis on religion. This challenge arises because these traditional perspectives in Jewish Studies do not encompass these new arrangements of community and identity, including the dialectic between non-Jewish Jews and Jewish non-Jews, between new converts to Jewishness and Jews who have been disconverted from their Jewishness, as well as between the Jews who were inside Hebraica and those who were outside and the political alliances they represent.

In this essay, we offer a new perspective within Jewish Studies in order to extend an opportunity to understand Brazil beyond the Jewish community, within the context of a national project driven by socio-political elements who seek to define themselves as White, conservative, capitalist, and armed. Importantly, this Bolsonarist project did not disappear with Jair Bolsonaro's failed reelection attempt in 2022, nor does it rely specifically

on the figure of Bolsonaro himself to remain strong and active in Brazilian society. Thus, in recognizing that this national project is shaped by an imagined Israel, we are also asserting that the field of Jewish Studies has become essential for comprehending contemporary Brazil.

