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### **GT: O(s) populismo(s) na América Latina e na Europa: Entre teorias e práticas**

## **From Lula to Bolsonaro: unravelling *Veja*'s (anti)populist fantasies**

*Sebastián Ronderos*

Doutor Universidade de Essex (U.K.); Professor Fundacao Getulio Vargas (Brasil).

*Jason Glynos*

Doutor Universidade de Essex (U.K.).

**Abstract:** In this paper we draw on the concept of fantasy and the principles of political discourse theory to develop an analytical framework for the study of *Veja*'s anti-populist discourse. As one of Brazil's most influential publications in elite policy-making circles, *Veja* exerts considerable influence over the way populist politics is portrayed and understood. By tracking the signifiers 'populis\*' in the pages of this weekly magazine, our study affirms the distinctive virtues of adopting a psychoanalytically-informed perspective on political antagonism and ideology, treating fantasy as a core concept in the study of discourses about populism. Far from remaining above the fray in its opposition to the discourses of both Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva (and the Workers' Party) and Jair Bolsonaro (and the Social Liberal Party), our critical fantasy study shows how *Veja*'s pronouncements were both ideologically invested and normatively inflected.



## Introduction

‘Following the backlash against left-wing populism from the Lula-Chavez era, it is now the right that needs, like celebrities harassed following a silly scandal, to reinvent itself’ (24/02/2021, p. 53). In its 02/24/2021 edition, one of Brazil’s most influential news magazines – *Veja* – highlighted the need for a *non*-populist movement that, in accordance with ‘the rules of the establishment’, would be capable of appealing to those angry sections of the population that are still ‘attracted to right-wing populism’. The crucial question for the magazine was: ‘Who will speak to those sections of Brazilian society to whom Bolsonaro was able to connect during his 2018 election campaign?’ (ibid.). Thus, it was by denouncing the ‘evil’ of left-wing populism and the ‘inconvenience’ of right-wing populism that *Veja* offered its anti-populist assessment of the battered state of world politics at the dawn of 2021 (ibid.).

The opening anti-populist ‘horseshoe’ pronouncement by *Veja* appears to indicate a rather even-handed, negative evaluation of Luiz Ignacio **Lula** da Silva (and the PT) on the one hand, and Jair **Bolsonaro** and the Social Liberal Party (PSL) on the other hand, casting them both as a populist menace<sup>1</sup>. As we will see, however, this apparent even-handedness is not so even-handed after all. A closer analysis of how *Veja* responded to the populist politics of Lula and Bolsonaro from 2015 until 2018 let slip *Veja*’s ideological and normative masks, revealing how its affectively-invested attacks on populism served primarily as a discursive device to advance its own agenda while presenting itself as ‘above the fray’. As such, a key aim of this article is to critically evaluate the horseshoe thesis according to which *Veja* presents itself as an anti-populist news magazine equally opposed to left and right wing populism, and in doing so to show how our analytical perspective allows us to more clearly appreciate its ideological stance and normative commitments.

Although *Veja*’s invocation of the term ‘populism’ forms part of its general commentary on Brazilian politics, the populist turn reflects a wider tendency evident in political language worldwide. References to populism feature prominently everywhere – in news headlines, opinion pieces and in many academic discussions – capturing the zeitgeist of a global political era. Insofar as this turn is reflected in academia, however, it is interesting to observe how this ‘has meant not only ‘a turn towards populist politics as an object of enquiry

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1 On 19 November 2019, months after winning the 2018 elections, Bolsonaro decides to part ways with the PSL, creating a new party ‘Alliance for Brazil’ (APB), organized around his personal figure.



but also a turn towards populism as a framework of analysis' (De Cleen and Glynos, 2020). In fact, in conducting our critical discursive study of *Veja*, we engage with this literature, suggesting that it is productive to use populism as an analytical 'entry point' that treats populism as a signifier rather than as a concept (De Cleen et al. 2018). In addition, building on literature that points to the need for scholars to take affects more seriously in social and political analysis, we draw on the concepts and principles of critical fantasy studies (CFS), conceived as a strand of discourse theory (Glynos 2021). In particular we argue that an appeal to fantasy can help make visible the normative and ideological significance of politically antagonistic discourses generally, and *Veja's* anti-populist discourse more specifically.

### **Discourse theory and discourses about populism**

Populism studies includes the study of populist discourses and the study of discourses *about* populism. The lion share of populism studies thus far is devoted to the former, where the need to pay attention to affect has been emphasized, and where there have been productive efforts to deploy concepts from psychoanalysis to think about the affectively charged nature of its political discourse (Eklundh, 2019; Stavrakakis, 2004; Glynos, 2021; Ronderos, 2021; Zicman de Barros, 2021; Glynos & Voutyras, 2016). It is the merit of political discourse theory (DT) as a research programme to have introduced a perspectival shift within the general field of populism studies, pointing also to the importance of studying discourses *about* populism (De Cleen et al., 2018; Stavrakakis, 2017; Nikisianis et al., 2018; Ronderos and Zicman de Barros, 2020; Mondon and Brown 2021). It is notable, however, that the use of psychoanalysis to tackle these broader questions of affective investment in discourses about populism, as well as its relation to the normative and ideological valence of those discourses, is still rather thin (see Glynos & Mondon 2016). Indeed, while the important role the signifier 'populism' plays in the critical analysis of discourses about populism has rightly been the subject of much discussion and empirical exploration, the corresponding role fantasy can play remains noticeably underdeveloped. We thus take seriously the call from scholars in this field to better integrate psychoanalytic categories into discourse studies, partly as a way to better grasp and understand the affective investment present in often polarized discourses about populism (De Cleen et al., 2021; Glynos, 2021; Stavrakakis, 2004; Ronderos, 2021; Zicman de Barros, 2021). In order to do so we build on and extend literature that emphasizes the



central role of the media in shaping the character, scope, and influence of discourses in the spheres of politics and academia, including discourses about populism (De Cleen & Goeyverts, 2020; Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007; Carpentier, 2020). Focusing on the role played by *Veja* - a particularly influential player in Brazil's media sphere - we argue that by developing the critical fantasy strand of discourse theory, we can help make more visible the ideological and normative significance of its anti-populist discourse and potentially, by extension, of other anti-populist or antagonistic forms of discourse.

### **Core principles and elements for the study of anti-populist fantasies and their ideological and normative significance**

Given the ongoing interest and investment in populism inside and outside academia, we trace the 'language games' (Wittgenstein 1963, 23) involving 'populis\*' as central signifying elements. We draw on the core principles of DT to explain how these elements assume vital discursive functions in the ideational construction of social reality.

The core ontological principles of DT derive from psychoanalytically-informed perspectives on identity and subjectivity. Freud recognised a splitting (*Spaltung*) agency in the subject, which called into question the centrality of the conscious ego in the production of social knowledge. Inspired by Freud's discovery of the unconscious, Jacques Lacan subverted the Cartesian idea of the subject as *cogito*, conceiving the subject as a subject of *lack* (Fink, 1996, 43). Prohibited from the enjoyment (*jouissance*) a fantasy of full identity promises, the subject's desire comes to be structured around attempts to overcome such a constitutive lack (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2008, 260; Žižek, 1989). Inspired by this understanding of subjectivity, DT opens up a pathway to the critical study of discourse organized around fantasy and the desire it stages. As fantasy is structured around the limits of symbolic representation (and the desire of its overcoming), 'the logic of fantasy names a narrative structure involving some reference to an idealised scenario promising an imaginary fullness or wholeness (the beatific side of fantasy) and, by implication, a disaster scenario (the horrific side of fantasy)' (Glynos, 2008, 283).

Both beatific and horrific dimensions of fantasy rely on key elements through which the social subject interprets symbolic limits and lack as a *loss* of enjoyment, often embodied in dramatic figures such as the 'villain', the 'hero' and the ideals at stake. For example, the



villain (eg., thief) might threaten (or steal) something important to us (our enjoyment, our way of life, whether moral, political, economic, sexual, etc.), often deriving (excessive) pleasure at our expense. Villains tend to be portrayed in negative aesthetic terms (ugly, horrible, dirty, undesirable, and so on).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the hero who comes to our rescue acts as *guarantor* of our ideals. ‘Hero-guarantors’ are often constructed in opposition to the villain (or thief) and are portrayed in positive aesthetic terms (beautiful, pretty, clean, sexy, and so on).<sup>3</sup> A critical fantasy study thus seeks to unpack the way subjects affectively (over-)invest in certain discursive elements, which are ultimately sustained by the desire to overcome the (social) lack of *enjoyment*.

In analysing the underlying logics in *Veja*’s mobilisation of the signifiers ‘populism\*’, we thus aim to show how fantasy can be analytically deployed to grasp the way affective power residing ‘between the lines’ is mobilised to offer gripping storylines. Importantly, however, this fantasmatic analysis enables us to draw out the normative and ideological significance of *Veja*’s discourse about populism. Our psychoanalytic perspective points to two things in particular. It points first to the ambiguity that attaches to loss. On one level this loss pertains to the (potential) loss of our way of life and its enjoyments, as threatened by a villain. But on another more disturbing level, the loss pertains to the (potential) loss of our bearings in a more general sense, foregrounding the idea that our way of life and its enjoyments are fundamentally contingent. This relativisation of our enjoyment provokes an anxiety that we are tempted to flee from and it is this proximity to anxiety that accounts for the energy underpinning our *ideological* investment in those things that promise us protection from this anxiety. Second, psychoanalysis, allied to political discourse theory, points out how the threat of loss and its overcoming can be articulated in any number of ways and that these articulated contents are not innocent because they reflect very specific *normative* commitments. A critical study of discourse, informed by psychoanalysis, thus seeks to unpack the elements of fantasy in order to ascertain both the ideological and normative significance of discourses about populism, in this case *Veja*’s anti-populist discourse.

## Research Strategy

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2 For other accounts of ‘theft of enjoyment’ see Žižek, 1989; Glynos, 2001.

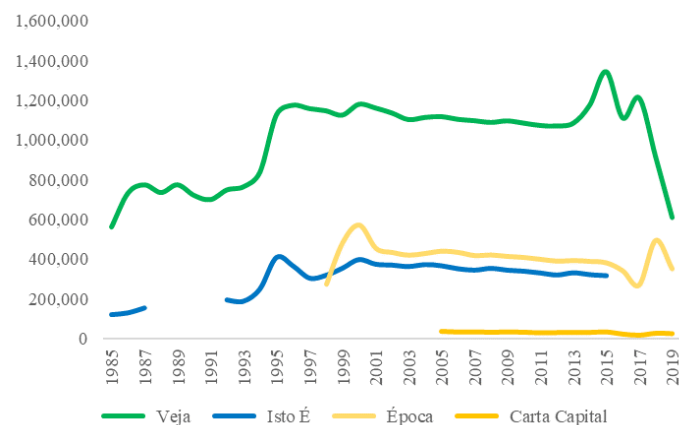
3 For other accounts of the ‘guarantor’ see Chang and Glynos, 2011.



### Why *Veja*?

Although there is no doubt that the general public today reads fewer print newspapers and magazines, the traditional media’s influence over policymakers, as well as financial and economic strategic players, continues to be considerable. This is how one should understand the significance attached to *Veja* as a weekly news magazine. *Veja*, since the 1980s, has targeted the Brazilian elite, aiming to exercise general influence over key decision-makers and discussion fora.<sup>4</sup> Graph 1 plots the trends for Brazil’s four news magazines with the highest circulation figures from 1985 to 2019. It shows that, although it targets an elite readership, *Veja* has managed, through a series of trickle-down effects, and within a highly concentrated media environment, to position itself as Brazil’s most read news magazine.

Graph 1 - Circulation 1985 to 2019<sup>5</sup>



Source: IVC - Circulation Verification Institute

Interestingly enough, *Veja*’s circulation attained historic peaks between 2014 and 2017, a period of intense social activity in which Rousseff’s government and the PT influence over Brazilian politics was challenged. This feature of the graph is perhaps understandable

4 One such case was *Veja*’s influence in constructing a business consensus over the need to impeach former president Fernando Collor de Mello in 1992 (see Chicarino et al. 2021).

5 According to IVC Brasil, the figure for the reported ‘circulation’ of a publication is the gross number of printed copies. (IstoÉ magazine has not been affiliated to the IVC since mid-2015, for which there is therefore is no data from 2016 onwards.) While this is what appears on the graph, it is worth noting that this figure does not coincide with the number of copies that actually reach the hands of readers, whether through subscriptions, separate sales, targeted distribution, or indeed through shared use.





given that Lula and the PT have been the magazine's favourite foes since the early 1980s, thus striking a chord with the rise of anti-PT sentiment from 2014 onwards.

Of the four weekly-published magazines, *Veja* is not only the most prominent in terms of distribution but also the oldest, being founded in 1968, followed by *Isto É* in 1976, *Época* in 1998, and *Carta Capital* in 1994. As such, *Veja* has become a key reference in Brazil since the dictatorship, forging the official journalistic discourse of 'distensão' – the slow process of democratic opening advanced by the Geisel government (1974-1979) that culminated in Brazil's return to democracy in 1985. While both *Isto É* and *Carta Capital* came into being through the work of one of *Veja*'s main founders, Mino Carta, *Época* was founded by the prominent multinational conglomerate *Grupo Globo*. Moreover, while *Carta Capital* is the only weekly that adopts a leftist editorial stance, *Veja* has the strongest appeal to the financial elites.

In this context it is worth noting that mainstream media assumed a prominent role in laying the groundwork for public debate from 2014 to 2018 in the wake of the money laundering and political corruption scandal associated with Brazil's state-owned oil company Petrobras. Inspired by the Italian *mani pulite* ('Clean Hands') anti-corruption operation, and energized by the widespread mass-mobilisation protests across Brazil, the *Lava Jato* ('Car Wash') criminal investigation spear-headed by judge Sergio Moro forged a direct communication channel between his team and Brazil's media.<sup>6</sup> Forging this alliance is now acknowledged to have been a key strategic move in winning over public opinion and taking down heavyweight public figures involved in corruption scandals. In particular, it facilitated the successful impeachment of Rousseff and the imprisonment of former president Lula (Almeida, 2019).

While the ubiquity of the signifiers 'populis\*' have been evident in the Brazilian press since the early 1950s (Ronderos and De Barros, 2020) in this paper we follow these signifiers over the period 2015-2019 to generate a corpus with which to reconstruct the narrative presented in the pages of *Veja*. In foregrounding the fantasmatic content and logic of its political commentary, and by implication the discourse of much mainstream discourse, we

6 Although the name *Lava Jato* as 'car wash' derives from the use of a petrol station in Brasilia to move valuables of illicit origin, investigated in the first phase of the operation, the name, insofar as it is linked to the criminal investigation itself, also implies that Moro is engaged in a 'cleaning' exercise, i.e. cleaning up the corporate and political corruption. In this sense, the name can be likened to Plato's pharmakon – as a name for both poison and cure.



draw attention to how, from an elite policy-making perspective, *Veja's* anti-populism was not so evenly applied to Lula/PT and Bolsonaro/PSL, revealing its normative motivation and ideological investment.

### ***Methods and sources***

In constructing the narrative accompanying occurrences of ‘populis\*’ through *Veja's* archives, we immersed ourselves in all relevant editorial and opinion content from the third quarter of 2015 to the end of 2018, comprising a database of 248 ‘populis\*’ occurrences<sup>7</sup>, amounting to 113 issues from 01/08/2015 to 31/12/2018. The key elements of fantasy outlined earlier provide a ‘macro-textual’ grammar with which to organize the material (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007, 277). These include the villain, the hero, as well as the implied ideals and obstacles. But while such ‘macro-textual’ grammars tend to be used to facilitate text-based interpretations, we also analysed the magazine covers of *Veja*. More specifically, we included in our analysis the magazine covers that corresponded to issues with higher occurrences of ‘populis\*’ because their images tended to dramatize in a particularly effective way the elements of fantasy, integrating the role of the villain and hero into the drama that structure our desires and enjoyments. In short, visual rhetoric, ‘with its layers, images, and, without a doubt, pervasive affectivity’ (Carpentier, 2020) offer a particularly apposite means of instantiating the ‘over-invested’ character of *Veja's* attachment to these figures. In what follows, therefore, we present a multi-modal analysis focusing on both text and image.

### **Constructing *Veja's* populist\*-centric narrative**

As noted earlier, in order to help us better explore the normative and ideological significance of *Veja's* references to populism we need to first identify the key elements of fantasy. In this section, then, we aim to track the evolution of *Veja's* narrative by focusing on the villains and heroes in its storyline and the way they dramatize the ideals at stake and the obstacles that obstruct their realisation. This section is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on *Veja's* anti-populist attack on Lula and his proxies, among them Rouseff and PT itself,

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7 If a word appears several times on a single page, they are counted as one occurrence. We can therefore say that the number of occurrences refers to the number of pages which include at least a single reference to ‘populis\*’.





covering the demonstrations leading to Rousseff's eventual impeachment (April 2015 to September 2016). The second focuses on *Veja's* anti-populist attack on both Lula and Bolsonaro, covering a period from the rise of Bolsonaro to Lula's imprisonment (April 2016 to April 2018). And the final part runs through the presidential campaign up to the election and its immediate aftermath (June 2018 to November 2018). Although the sequencing of the three sub-sections is chronological, it is important to point out that the description and analysis within each is thematic. The aim of this exercise is to draw attention to the highly cathected character of its descriptions and images; to trace the meanings associated with the signifiers 'populis\*'; and to identify the fantasmatic elements of the narrative constructed by *Veja* (the villains, heroes, and ideals).

#### *Veja attacks the populism of Lula*

From mid-2015 to the dawn of 2016, *Veja's* storyline narrates a story of national crisis. Its narrative construction is propelled by growing anti-PT sentiment, enabling *Veja's* opposition to populism to assume a central role in explaining this period's social and political predicament. Depicting the populist villain (Lula, and Dilma Rousseff as proxy) as a parasitic, state-interventionist and corrupt political agent, *Veja* creates the space for a moral hero to emerge (judge Sergio Moro), capable of keeping the populist menace at bay. In what follows, we chart these discursive turns, paying special attention to the meanings attached to the signifiers 'populis\*' and the affective investments in the characters – both villainous and heroic – constructed by *Veja*.

Seen as a 'rickety' political force in 1980 (23/01/1980, 27), PT was described in 2015 by *Veja* as the 'Brazilian people's foremost enemy' (12/08/2015a, p. 42 and 43), vividly portrayed on the cover of issue 12/08/2015 under the headline 'Brazil calls out for help'. Warning its readers about Rousseff's credibility deficit, *Veja* alerted its readers that the *Lava Jato* investigation would soon bring to light extraordinarily incriminating evidence, and pointed to 'the beginning of the end of a cycle of populism and corruption that devastated Brazil' (12/08/2015b, 51).

The *Lava Jato* investigative task force was based in Curitiba and headed by judge Sergio Moro. Its anti-corruption efforts had featured prominently in the press since March 17, 2014, with Moro being hailed as a 'popstar' and a 'hero' ever since (07/10/2015, 40). In a



nine-page special report *Veja* paid tribute to Moro’s audacious crusade against corruption and crime, listing the 300 sentences that made this young judge a ‘national celebrity’ (30/12/2015, 50). In fact, the last printed edition of 2015 (30/12/2015) was dedicated to Moro under the hyped headline: ‘He saved the year!’

Figure 1: issue 30/12/2015



Source: *Veja* archive

Here it is crucial to note how the rhetorical reference to ‘populis\*’ in *Veja*’s pages often appeared in close proximity with the signifier ‘corrupt[ion]’. In so doing, the ‘populis\*’ reference served as an indirect way of describing how the common wealth – embodied in the state-owned oil company Petrobras – was placed at the service of personal interests, enabling widespread, endemic corruption.

Corruption, however, quickly became synonymous also with public spending and state intervention more generally. In fact, like the oil industry, other segments of the energy sector were described as being exposed to the vagaries of state intervention, understood not as a means of correcting or softening the excesses of the market but as interference with the market, ushering in potentially tragic outcomes: ‘the populism of Dilma’s government has disastrous consequences for the electricity sector and the consumer’ (10/02/2016, 78). Lula had based his ‘distributive populism’ on the commodity boom, but Rousseff would have to make use of different means to keep her ‘foolish [interventionist] measures’ afloat (03/02/2016, 10). According to the magazine, not only did these measures go against the laws governing the ‘creation of wealth’, but they proved that ‘populist regimes last only as long as other people’s money’ (ibid.).

Figure 2: issue 09/03/2016    Figure 3: issue 16/03/2016



Source: *Veja* archive

Under the headline ‘Lula and the law’, the special issue 09/03/2016 detailed the many scandals plaguing Lula, Rousseff and PT. The account, however, centred on *Lava Jato*'s 24<sup>th</sup> phase, involving the so-called federal police operation *Aletheia* (a transliteration of the Greek word for ‘truth’ or ‘unconcealedness’), spearheaded by judge Moro and a 200-person strong force. It led to Lula being detained on March 4, 2016, at 8:40 am, taken from his home in São Bernardo do Campo to be questioned by the Federal Police in an effort to gather evidence of kickbacks and bribes channelled from inflated *Petrobras* contracts (figure 2).

In a public speech, alluding to Moro’s taskforce, Lula hit back, savaging the operation: ‘If they wanted to kill the *jararaca* [pit viper], they didn't hit the head but its tail’. Echoing Lula’s defiant statements, *Veja*'s 16/03/2016 issue ran with the headline ‘The desperation of the *jararaca*’, portraying Lula as an enraged, dangerous, and frantic Medusa figure (figure 3). In so doing, the magazine claimed that those who followed ‘simplistic and populist measures’ could only end up cornered by history's judgment (*ibid.*, p.60).

For *Veja*, Lula's allegations were nothing but a populist sham, used in a despicable attempt to place himself above the law. Like other ‘populist experiences creating consumption bubbles’, PT’s ‘disdain for the rich can only be explained by profound economic ignorance and unusual political autism’. Painting an unambiguously horrific fantasy scenario, *Veja* warned that if Lula were to prevail, the ‘social chaos [in Brazil] will be enormous’ (09/03/2016, 24). An opportunity to amplify this horrific dimension emerged soon enough, following the leaking by Moro of a ‘revealing’ phone call between Lula and Rousseff, which appeared to suggest that Lula would be appointed as the new chief of staff. The news had a striking impact and was splashed across *Veja*'s pages. Alarming its readers with the significance of such a move by Rousseff’s government, the magazine announced the regrettable beginning of ‘Lula’s third presidential mandate’ (23/03/2016a, 49).



Figure 4: issue 23/03/2016



Source: *Veja* archive

Lula’s public reappearance signaled the comeback of ‘left populism’ and it could not but ‘awaken profound fears over the populist mismanagement of the public machine’. Strictly speaking, it is not the voice of *Veja* that should be heard but rather the ‘growing number of businessmen saying there is no way out for the economy with Rousseff in the *Planoalto* [government palace]’ (23/03/2016b, 75). Rousseff’s impeachment was thus necessary to stop the ‘return of populist politics’ (ibid, 76), awakened by Lula’s desperate effort to re-enter the political fray (figure 4). In the end, Lula’s nomination only lasted a couple of days, it being overturned by the Supreme Court (STF) on March 17, 2016. Worried entrepreneurs and economists now appeared in *Veja*’s pages, claiming that ‘Rousseff is flirting with populism in order to survive’. As Rousseff’s interventionism was disrupting the market, it was only through impeachment that the Brazilian economy could move forward (13/04/2016, 71-72).

Figure 5: issue 20/04/2016



Source: *Veja* archive

*Veja* depicted the decline and fall of populist forces as the beginning of a new prosperous economic cycle, whose benefits would be seen in due course. ‘[P]opulism’s



impact on oil prices ruined the ethanol industry but now, without direct political interference at *Petrobras*, the sector is starting to rebuild itself' (13/04/2016, 92). Such a principle was well-affirmed within financial sectors, leading brokers and investment firms to make deals to profit from Rousseff's downfall.

There is a direct dependence. The weaker Rousseff's government is, the more valuable Brazilian shares become, especially those in state-owned companies, as they are most affected by populist interventionism (20/04/2016, 67).

In a newly added special issue (20/04/2016), *Veja* celebrated the impeachment vote in the plenary session of the Chamber of Deputies. Rousseff was accused of breaking the budgetary law through so-called 'tax pedaling' and the process moved up to the Senate. Lacking the allies needed and losing the private sector's confidence, it was declared that 'Dilma no longer commands Brazil', expelling her from the game of politics for putting 'populism and corruption at the centre of the nation's worries' (07/09/2016, 49), and thus justifiably wiping her sinister smile from her face (figure 5).

The analysis above shows how the Brazilian 'populis\*' villain, chiefly embodied by Lula's fearful figure (with Rousseff and the PT serving as proxies), embodied a parasitic and corrupt agent in *Veja*'s narrative, the cause of social lack, draining economic wealth through state interventionism. We thus witness how *Veja* plays on a crucial ambiguity in the meaning that attaches to populism. While corruption appears at a frequent collocate of 'populis\*', it is clear that it mobilises the term in a way that targets public spending and state interventionism more generally. Elevating corruption as a key constituent of populism, however, makes it possible for a moral guarantor to appear in the heroic form of judge Moro, to challenge the corrupt populist villains of our common wealth (and our capacity to enjoy it). *Veja* portrays Moro as a stoic, handsome and tenacious saviour, a righter of wrongs, opposing widespread corruption and heroically defending the interests of the Brazilian people against the left-populist menace. Moreover, the highly cathected character of the descriptions and images related to the construction of villains and hero through the signifiers 'populis\*' is palpable. The affective over-investment in these signifiers and their associations with moral corruption and immature profligate spending of others' money indicates that something more is at stake beyond a perceived threat to principles of free market economy, namely, an enjoyment linked



to an ontology of lack (to be discussed further later). In what follows, we explore how the appearance of Jair Bolsonaro on the scene gives *Veja* the opportunity to affirm an anti-populist horseshoe hypothesis.

*Veja attacks Lula and Bolsonaro (Veja affirms the horseshoe hypothesis)*

In this subsection, our narrative construction draws on *Veja*'s 'populis\*' storyline following the impeachment process of Rousseff's government. At first it may appear surprising that Rousseff's impeachment sparks *Veja*'s further preoccupation with, and discursive investment in, the signifiers 'populis\*'. With Lula remaining Brazil's most popular politician and favourite candidate for the 2018 election, it is nevertheless understandable that *Veja*'s anti-populist anxiety remains high and even rises. Such concerns are turbocharged by the appearance of Bolsonaro on the political scene, depicted and constructed by *Veja* as yet another populist villain who places Brazil's economy at risk. As we will see, however, this anxious concern is appeased eventually by two developments: the appearance of a new heroic figure (Michel Temer) to act as guarantor of our way of life; and the much-anticipated imprisonment of Lula, *Veja*'s main villain. In what follows, we highlight key strands of this storyline.

While Rousseff's impeachment seemed to offer grounds for optimism, political developments continued to upset the country's economic prospects, according to *Veja*. Not only was Lula's popularity still growing, making him the favourite candidate for the 2018 elections, but a right-wing populist rival had started to make advances in the electoral race:

The rise of populists and radicals in moments of crisis... is a classic tragedy in the history of democracies, and this could not be better represented than by the figure of Bolsonaro (20/04/2016, 67)

Bolsonaro's prospects were good given 'the overwhelming fiscal imbalances bequeathed by Dilma Rousseff on account of populist spending sprees that drained public finances' (15/03/2017, 61). The economic collapse caused by corrupt left-populist interventionism made right-wing protectionist populism appear preferable, thus sowing the seeds for an era of prolonged political polarisation and social anger. According to *Veja*, if





liberals were to blame for Bolsonaro’s rise, it was only because they had not sufficiently challenged PT’s radicalism from the outset (11/05/2016, 72).

Nevertheless, with Dilma’s replacement by her vice-president, Michel Temer, a window of opportunity presented itself. Although ‘there is still a bit of populism in the air’, the investment prospects noticeably improved (15/03/2017, 62). Temer appeared to ‘distan[c]e himself from PT’s radical agenda’, assuming a well-thought-out and steady reformist agenda, thereby emerging as the political guarantor of future market stability. In Temer’s own words: ‘I want to go down in history as a reformist president... I am not a populist’ (15/03/2017, 65). As elections approached, *Veja* went on the offensive. To offset the very real populist danger of Lula’s credible chance of winning the 2018 elections (19/07/2017, 67), demands for reform were made to bring fiscal order and prevent further chaos.

Without reforms, there will be no confidence in the economy, and public finances will fail, putting the state's own control apparatus at risk and making room for populist leaders who sell illusions (and benefits) in exchange for support. We already know how that all ends (12/07/2017, 56).

Demands for austerity measures and responsible fiscal control were thus made throughout 2016 and these points were hammered home in *Veja*’s pages, constructing both Lula and Bolsonaro as equally dangerous in the populist electoral menace they represented, as indicated in the morose faces of the 8/11/2017 issue that ran with the headline ‘the politics that frightens’ (figure 6). At stake in the next presidential elections was the decision for ‘a better or worse future’ and such a battle ‘will not be divided between left and right, but between reformism and populism’ (13/09/2017, 72-73).

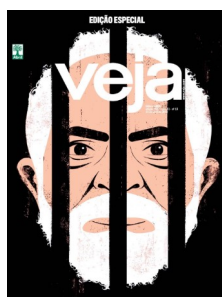
Figure 6: issue 8/11/2017



Source: *Veja* archive

However, while the electoral campaign was in full swing, a special issue, which had been announced by *Veja* as early as 2014 (29/10/2014) was published (figure 7). On April 7, 2018, Lula was sentenced to prison for twelve years and one month. *Veja* gleefully presented some of the 144 issues dedicated entirely to denouncing Lula’s anti-democratic tendencies (in about 6% of the overall number of issues, 11//04/2018b, 93-94). With Brazil’s biggest populist out of the political arena, a ‘Trump-like figure with opposite ideological tendencies’, it was now time to think carefully about the political prospects for the upcoming elections (11/04/2018a, 59).

Figure 7: issue 11/04/2018



Source: *Veja* archive

By following the signifiers ‘populis\*’ we have identified the main elements of *Veja*’s fantasmatic narrative of this period, supplementing our account with references to selected cover images that demonstrate the highly cathected investment in key villains (Lula, Roussef, Bolsonaro) and hero-guarantors (Moro and Temer). Moral corruption and state interventionism remain central meanings associated with the signifiers ‘populis\*’, employed as a means of elevating the market-rule principle and ideal in *Veja*’s storyline. However, we have also seen how the attachment to this ideal was strengthened by the threat Bolsonaro posed, whose alleged interventionism rested less on redistributive than on protectionist mechanisms, thereby erecting a different set of political barriers to market dynamics.



*Bolsonaro calls Veja's bluff (Horseshoe hypothesis rejected)*

Up to Lula's much-awaited imprisonment, the even-handedness of *Veja's* anti-populist discourse seemed consistent. However, Bolsonaro's explicit embrace of a reform agenda, including anti-protectionist free-market, anti-corruption and austerity measures, forced *Veja* to put its anti-leftist cards on the table. In other words, its normative commitments could no longer hide behind its anti-populism, which was now more clearly revealed to be a cover for its anti-leftism. As we will see *Veja's* moves were facilitated by turning to hero-guarantors, on both moral grounds (Moro) and economic grounds (Paulo Guedes). Suddenly and remarkably the threat of Bolsonaro's populism appeared to dissolve. In what follows, we chart some of these turns in *Veja's* storyline.

Already in August Bolsonaro was talking 'about privatisation, even defending a social security reform agenda, to which he was opposed' in earlier stages of the campaign (19/08/2018, 27). Originally sympathetic to trade protectionism and wary of foreign capital, Bolsonaro's economic stance had changed quickly under the guidance of his Chicago School economic adviser, Guedes, Bolsonaro's newly appointed future Minister of Finance.

Figure 8: issue 17/10/2018



Source: *Veja* archive

With Lula playing an electoral role through his proxy candidate, and Bolsonaro's more orthodox market stance safeguarded by the economic guarantor, Paulo Guedes, *Veja's* reference to 'populism\*' in characterizing Brazilian political actors dropped dramatically. Not only were there fewer references but they became somewhat circumstantial and vague. While the populist menace was still something to be resisted, the reformist\*/populist\* antagonism seemed far less important while Lula was 'off stage'.



The solution to Brazil's problems is not simple, and the temptation of populist promises grows in the final stretch of campaigns. However, regardless of who wins, the next occupant of the *Palacio do Planoalto* is expected to be responsible with the economy (17/10/2018, 47)

As Bolsonaro was the likely victor and had appointed reliable ministers, *Veja's* fear had turned into vigilant expectation. Now, Bolsonaro needed to 'show he is capable of governing' (figure 8). After all, his rise symbolised nothing but the people's 'rejection of PT's populism and reign of corruption' (31/10/2018, 46).

[Bolsonaro's] commitments to reduce the fiscal deficit and the public debt itself are hopeful, and explain the euphoric joy of the market in recent weeks given the growing chances that the right-wing candidate will receive the presidential sash<sup>8</sup> (17/10/2018, 44)

The protectionist menace had dissolved amidst the country's newly 'ultraliberal' prospects, boosting the *Real* (Brazilian currency) and heralding a festive era for the Brazilian market (Figure 10). And, as we will now see, with the dissolution of the protectionist threat the threat that Bolsonaro's populism represented was also decisively downgraded.

Figure 9: issue 07/11/2018      Figure 10: issue 28/11/2018



Source: *Veja* archive

Already amidst Bolsonaro's victory, *Veja* struck a much more optimistic tone in offering its assessment of Brazil's political and economic prospects. It was keen to point out, for

8 The presidential sash is a decorative cross-body ornament, revered as a national symbol by the cultures that adopt it as a badge of the office of President of the Republic.



example, that while Bolsonaro's figure may 'resemble that of Silvio Berlusconi, a right-wing populist', the Italian and Brazilian conditions were completely different. This was because the *mani pulite* operation failed to punish corrupt politicians in Italy, allowing populist sentiments to fester and grow in strength (07/11/2018, 43).

However, not everything was different in the Italian and Brazilian cases. Just as the Italian prosecutor of *mani pulite*, Antonio di Pietro, entered politics, Moro now made a bold move (figure 9). With Moro as the new Justice Minister, 'Bolsonaro formed an 'absolutely unique' government by 'betting on superministers', bringing credibility to his anti-corruption mandate (07/11/2018, 47).

Unsurprisingly, it is at this point that we find the only positive valence accorded to the signifiers 'populis\*' in *Veja's* pages. In an interview with The New School professor James Miller, *Veja* produced a special article dedicated to populism. Under the headline 'Light at the end of the tunnel', the piece noted how populist actors could often invigorate liberal democracy (14/11/2018, 17-19). Thus we see not simply a shift of meanings associated with populism but also a shift in the valence attached to populism, as it becomes clear that certain forms of populism (pro-market, anti-leftist) are more tolerable than others, and even serve to re-invigorate democracy. Bolsonaro's dramatic shift on the economic front thus calls *Veja's* bluff, at least as regards its apparent horseshoe stance on populism, laying bare the affectively-endowed normative preferences underlying *Veja's* anti-populist discourse.

### **On the ideological and normative significance of *Veja's* anti-populist discourse**

So far, we have not simply drawn attention to the ubiquitous character of the words 'populis\*' in the corpus of this study. In re-presenting *Veja's* narrative, we have also demonstrated the pivotal role these signifiers play in its construction of political antagonism. We did so by treating populism not so much as a frame of analysis (De Cleen & Glynos 2020) but as an entry point, following the 'populis\*' signifiers as a means of unpacking the basic elements of its underlying fantasmatic narrative. In this final section we turn to the explanatory and critical implications of this analysis. We return to our theoretical discussions of fantasy to foreground the ideological and normative dimensions underlying *Veja's* anti-populist discourse and explain how we contribute to the debates around the critical study of discourses about populism. In particular, we argue that *Veja's* opposition to populism is driven by an



ideologically invested normative commitment to an anti-leftist free market economy. By focusing on lack/loss, we bring to bear how these key references to ‘populis\*’ fantasmatically direct normative responses to perceived problems and invite distinctive forms of enjoyment that underpin its ideological investments.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the figure of the villain in the narrative serves to do two things. First, it transforms ontological lack into an empirical loss. Second, it attributes blame for this loss (whether this loss is realised or threatened) to an ‘other’, conceptually embodied in the villain. In *Veja*’s fantasmatic narrative, Lula serves as the prime embodiment of this horrifying ‘other’, giving Rousseff and PT a more subordinate status in constructing the villain. For example, Lula was described as a lazy worker attaining unearned political power, with *Veja* presenting him as an immoral thief of economic enjoyment who, in his depraved overspending state, would enjoy excessively at the expense of others:

He fits perfectly into the definition of *bon-vivant*: a person who does not work, living on privileges and perks... [N]ot being of rich origin, these types acquire access to luxuries through profitable contracts and by wielding power, but without subscribing to the values needed to distinguish the acceptable from the undesirable (26/04/2017, 63)

The construction of the villain in *Veja*’s storyline depicts a parasitic agent feeding on the wealth (enjoyment) of others; an outsider who benefits, but does not create, the nation’s wealth; someone who cannot tell the difference between right and wrong; and an operator who uses political mechanisms to interfere with the ‘proper’ way of organizing social life. In this way, *Veja* discursively places itself above the fray by appealing to a technical, market-oriented expert knowledge that casts all political (populist) interventions as arbitrary and dangerous. It foregrounds the fantasmatic ideal of a depoliticized consensus democracy undergirded by dispassionate elitist expertise, even leading the magazine, at times, to question whether democracy itself might too precious to be left in the hands of lay voters (e.g. 20/07/2016, 73).

Against the background of *Veja*’s market-economic technocratic fantasy, PT’s public spending and redistributive policy aims thus appeared to threaten in a fundamental way the





normative interests the magazine represented. And yet, when Rousseff appointed the market-friendly Chicago school economist Joaquim Levy as finance minister in her second term, the magazine's anti-PT rhetoric appeared – if anything – to have been stepped up rather than softened, thus revealing *Veja's* anti-leftist stance. In other words, *Veja* opposed not just any form of public spending and state intervention but only those forms – however market-friendly – that decrease inequality and threatened the interest of the wealthy and the *status quo* more generally. Making corruption the central characteristic of populism through its discursive articulations, therefore, enabled *Veja's* anti-left-populism to appear simply as anti-populism, presenting public spending and state intervention as a form of corruption, carving out the space for an extra-economic moral guarantor to appear on the scene in order to rescue Brazil from this predicament, namely, Moro.

Initially, of course, Bolsonaro's protectionist plans also fitted *Veja's* populist corruption frame, thereby appearing to confirm the horseshoe hypothesis (that *Veja* would be equally opposed to left and right wing populism). However, as soon as Bolsonaro's rhetoric shifted, *Veja* let slip its ideologically-invested normative agenda. Despite Bolsonaro's reactionary right-wing views regarding religion, gender, sexuality, and the nation, *Veja* came round to the view that he was not really a populist after all. *Veja* deployed its villain-and-hero macro-contextual grammar and narrative, alongside highly cathected image-based representations, to make the contrasts between left and right enjoyments accessible to its readership. First, Bolsonaro matched *Veja's* rhetoric that public meddling in the private sector ('the market') would only produce and exacerbate corruption, ushering in the prospect of the appointment of Moro as Justice Minister and moral guarantor. Second, the appointment of the pro-market Chicago-school economic conservative (Guedes) as his future Minister of Finance enabled the latter to play the role of economic guarantor of the nation's wealth.

However, while *Veja's* support for Bolsonaro effectively called its anti-populist bluff, unmasking its anti-leftist *normative* commitments, *Veja's* highly charged anti-populist rhetoric is equally revealing. In particular, it points to its *ideological* investment in the normative agenda to which it subscribes. As we noted in our theoretical discussion earlier in the article, we can make sense of the over-invested character of its rhetoric if we see it as a means of coming to terms with 'ontological lack'. From this point of view, *Veja's* extreme anti-populism serves as a way to avoid confronting the ineradicability of value-pluralism and



the contingent character of identity construction. It is not just that *Veja* prefers anti-leftist forms of governance that protect the ‘natural’ market and *status quo*, it is also invested in the idea that this is the *only* rightful way of organizing the polity, as revealed by technocratic experts.

However, the profound enjoyment-euphoria brought about in the aftermath of the 2018 elections in *Veja*’s storyline would eventually dissipate. Moro’s figure crumbled (Figure 11) and Bolsonaro’s market-liberal mask, embodied by Guedes, fell off (Figure 12), registering the re-emergence of the spectre of populism.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 11: issue 19/06/2019 Figure 12: issue 03/03/2021



Source: *Veja* archive

## Conclusion

Despite *Veja*’s apparently even-handed anti-populist stance targeting Lula and Bolsonaro, we argued that upon closer inspection, it turns out that *Veja*’s anti-populism is actually an anti-*left*-populism. Treating *Veja*’s anti-populism as a form of discourse *about* populism, we examined how the signifiers ‘populis\*’ were articulated in *Veja* from the time the Petrobras scandal exploded in the media in 2015, which implicated Lula’s PT, to Bolsonaro’s victory in the Presidential elections of 2018. We deployed key concepts and principles of political discourse theory and critical fantasy studies in order to help make visible the way the signifier populism served as both cover and vehicle for its anti-leftist, pro-free-market normative messages. Moreover, we argued that the highly-charged character of its discourse betrayed an ideological investment that cannot be properly explained on normative grounds alone. The

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that, on March 23, 2021, the Supreme Court (STF) suspended judge Moro for his handling of *Lava Jato*’s treatment of Lula’s case, finding him to have been partial and politicised in his investigations of the PT leader, thus enabling Lula to present himself as presidential candidate in the 2022 elections.



enjoyment evident in its attacks on Lula and PT were linked to an ontology of lack and its appearance as the possibility of loss – the loss of a way of life and the guarantees that support the *status quo*. Intimations of lack provoke anxiety because they point to the contingent character of social reality, including how there are different – more and less legitimate – ways of organizing the political economy of a polity. For *Veja* the signifier ‘populism’ marked a space in which this lack became articulated as an enjoyment whose loss was threatened by the populist agent *qua* villain. This articulation provoked an anxiety that prompted a powerful impulse to keep it at bay, reflected clearly in the way *Veja*’s villains and heroes were affectively over-invested. By unpacking the fantasmatic elements that animated the drama of anti-populist discourse, our critical fantasy approach thus foregrounded the normative and ideological significance of *Veja*’s anti-populist discourse.

By drawing on the concepts and principles of CFS and DT, and by applying it to the case of *Veja*’s anti-populist discourse we have sought to expand CFS and DT’s field of application in the study of anti-populism and the study of discourses about populism more generally. While corpus linguistics facilitated the operationalization of our method of ‘following the signifier’ in the study of anti-populist discourse, we have shown how important it is to accompany this with thick qualitative description and interpretation, using both historical context and theoretical reflection as a way to make sense of the material. We suggest that a critical fantasy studies approach can advance the frontiers of political discourse theory by following the signifier ‘populism’ in order to go *beyond* populism. Treating populism as an entry point and ‘vanishing mediator’, rather than as a frame of analysis, enables us to use this approach to locate the source of ideological investments and the normative commitments for which populism serves as a vehicle.

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