

The Return of The Thaumaturge Kings: an Analysis of Presidential Discourse in Mexico and Brazil during the COVID-19 emergency in 2020

El retorno de Los Reyes Taumaturgos: un análisis del discurso presidencial en México y Brasil durante la emergencia del COVID-19 en el 2020



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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the public discourse employed by presidents López Obrador in Mexico and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil during the outbreak of the 2020 pandemic. The two cases hold important similarities: throughout the first outbreaks, both leaders had a negationist and disdained attitude towards the disease, trying to maintain their popularity by contradicting the scientific arguments about the impact of the pandemic. This article centers on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the fieldwork focused on gathering information published on social media profiles and online news. Outcomes will show how the presidential public approval stood in the construction of alternative public discourse, based on fakes news, social media and political polarization that praises a messianic president with supernatural powers.

Keywords:

Populism; pandemic/COVID-19; Latin America; critical discourse analysis; fake news.

Resumen:

Este trabajo analiza el discurso utilizado por los presidentes López Obrador en México y Jair Bolsonaro en Brasil durante la irrupción de la pandemia del año 2020. Ambos casos guardan importantes similitudes: los dos líderes mantuvieron una actitud negacionista hacia la enfermedad, tratando de mantener su popularidad y contradiciendo los argumentos científicos sobre el impacto de la pandemia. Este artículo se basa en el Análisis Crítico del Discurso (ACD), el trabajo de campo recopila información publicada en perfiles de redes sociales y noticias en línea. Los resultados mostrarán cómo la aprobación pública presidencial se centró en la construcción de un discurso alternativo, basado en noticias falsas, uso de redes sociales y polarización política que exalta la figura de un presidente mesiánico con poderes sobrenaturales.

Palabras clave:

Populismo; pandemia/COVID-19; América latina; análisis crítico del discurso; noticias falsas.

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1. Introduction

During the Middle Ages and until the 19th century, kings in France and England cured diverse diseases by touching sick and dying people with their hands. *The royal touch*, as this practice is known, was not only a ceremony that gathered thousands searching for a miraculous cure for their illnesses but for these kings, considered thaumaturges or miracle makers, it was a demonstration of power and royal legitimacy (Bloch, 1961). The irruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2020, despite the huge cultural, historical and technological distance from the Middle Ages, brought a galore of exotic and disturbing events across the globe (Goodman and Carmichael, 2020; Rogers et al., 2020): civil disobedience, attacks against medical workers, the destruction of telecommunication infrastructure and the search for alternative and magical forms to cure COVID-19. Most of the incidents were nourished by disinformation, social polarization and a rising distrust towards traditional democratic institutions, science and the media (Brainard and Hunter, 2020). Populist politicians and autocrats took advantage of this convoluted context to legitimize their regimens and justify authoritarian decisions (Vieten, 2020): gaining political control, condemning dissidents, and harassing social minorities. Despite the huge number of casualties and the negative effects of the pandemic in their countries, some of these populist leaders were able to construct a discourse based on disinformation and polarization that legitimizes the figure of a strong and powerful *thaumaturgic* president that cures and protects their people from this novel and intriguing disease. This was the case of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (Left Wing) in México and Jair Bolsonaro (Right Wing) in Brazil, that besides their distinct political visions held a similar position towards COVID-19.

This paper analyzes the public discourse employed by the presidents in Mexico and Brazil during the COVID-19 emergency in 2020. The two cases hold important similarities: throughout the first outbreaks, Obrador and Bolsonaro had a negationist and disdained attitude towards the disease, trying to maintain their popularity by contradicting the scientific arguments about the impact of the pandemic in their countries. Positioning themselves as strong figures immune to the virus, with mystic abilities capable to stop its propagation and even to cure it (Badillo, 2020; Tavares et al., 2020). These positions turned into an uncoordinated national strategy to contain the disease, causing several thousands of casualties and a huge economic impact in both countries. However, besides the huge negative outcomes, both presidents enjoyed public approval during the first outbreaks (Reuters, 2020; Phillips, 2020).

The main aim of this article is to understand how both leaders were able to build an efficient discourse that empowers their figure despite the negative effects of the pandemic in their countries. This work departs from an introduction that describes the political and social context in 2020. Then, in the theoretical section, I discuss the main authors and theories related to the media and populism. In the methodological section, I describe the Critical Discourse Analysis procedure, and the parameters used to conduct the fieldwork. The outcome and discussion section serves to illustrate and develop three main issues (a) how Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Jair Bolsonaro took advantage of a polarization discourse to gain the presidential contest in their countries, (b) the construction of populist discourse in the media, and (c) the analysis of the medical populism and the thaumaturgic populist elements in Bolsonaro and López Obrador's discourse during the irruption of the pandemic. Finally, in the conclusions, I present the closing arguments about the article. Outcomes will demonstrate that both presidents kept their popularity besides the negative effects of the pandemic in their countries, because of the construction of an efficient alternative

populist discourse, based on fake news, social media and political polarization that praises a president with thaumaturgic powers.

1.1. A convulsed political and social context

Before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the global political landscape was immersed in three main trends: (1) the consolidation of digital media, particularly social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and the use of smartphones as the main communication and information media. Most of the contemporary protest and mobilizations across the globe such as The Arab Spring in 2010 (Brown et al., 2012) or the case of the “I Can’t Breathe”, a social movement against the murder of George Floyd and police violence in the US, stood on the use of digital media to denounce governmental actions and promote civil engagement (Haynes et al., 2021). But digital media has become an imperative for electoral purposes as well: having a social media profile on Twitter and Facebook among other spaces has become a key task for political parties and candidates to spread their agenda and increase the number of sympathizers (Wharton Business Daily, 2020).

A second trend is marked by the political and social polarization that have nourished the outbreak of extreme ideology movements on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Such is the case of Donald Trump in The United States and the growing popularity of extremist parties in Austria, France, Germany, and Spain among other countries (Biswas, 2020). Those movements gained huge popularity thanks to the decline of confidence in traditional political parties, the free market, and international institutions such as the European Union. Amid this context, people, even in rich countries with high levels of development, have searched for candidates and parties with heterodox and populist ideologies (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023).

The last trend is the skepticism towards traditional communication media, the Fake News phenomena and the use of disinformation to cause polarization and social destabilization (Farkas and Schou, 2019). Since people are more dependable on the information published online, mainly social platforms, than in traditional media, such as print press and television, many political organizations or individuals use these spaces to spread false information or news with partial and incomplete data to spread doubts or division among the public (Miró-Llinares and Aguerri, 2021). Publishing false or corrupted news is now one of the most important strategies used to attack, not just political adversaries or governments, but commercial competency, actors, athletes, and other public figures.

The COVID-19 pandemic was not immune to these trends. On the contrary, all these settings shaped the way people got informed and even reacted about the contingency. As the disease became global, a huge information flow invaded social media platforms. It has been an infodemic in which, for several months, the pandemic became the central topic, if not the only, in the local and international media (Pulido et al., 2020). People were able to access through their smartphones and computers a huge galore of real data, false information and prejudiced opinions about the sanitary contingency converged (Depoux et al., 2020). Since its outbreak, the pandemic was the object of organized misinformation campaigns and distrust towards scientific evidence and data (Salaverría et al., 2020). Every aspect related to COVID-19: origin, mortality, spread rate, and social impact were susceptible of being distorted and used as an argument to harass dissents, diminish democratic institutions and empower populist and authoritarian regimes (Lin, 2020).

In Latin America, social polarization and the spread of fake news have been present in the political agenda across the region as well. In addition, there have been several protests in Chile, Colombia and Mexico against governmental decisions related to the rise of taxes and insecurity (Litewka and Heitman, 2020; The Economist, 2021). The inter-regional migration flows from Haiti, Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua have, and still do, represent a great challenge for neighboring countries and the United States. Amid this convulsed context, the pandemic became the perfect argument for populist presidents in the region to restrict constitutional guarantees such is the case of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and, in some cases, the sanitary emergency was used to gain public acceptance, paradoxically by denying the severity of the disease as is the case of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in Mexico and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (Blofield et al., 2020). In both cases, the manipulation of information about COVID-19 was used to build a rhetoric that empowers the presidential figure and hide from the public scope the real effects of the pandemic.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Extremist movements and the Internet

In the second decade of the new millennium, populist movements across the globe are retaking a new breath, fed by economic crises, a rising xenophobia and a disenchantment from traditional politics and institutions (Wodak, 2015; Moffitt, 2016). Extremist political movements have been very successful channeling social pessimism and anger to obtain electoral wins (Steenvoorden and Harteveld, 2018). They were able to construct a discourse rooted in a nostalgic idealized past shaped by moral conservatism and economic protectionism, as the case of Donald Trump's political slogan MAGA (Make America Great Again) in the United States (Guterson, 2017), the far-right political party VOX in Spain "Hacer España grande otra vez" (Make Spain great Again). In contraposition, other movements from left-wing ideology, Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain, that enjoyed a great popularity since the global financial crisis in 2008 because of their criticism towards the financial economy system (Font et al., 2021), are now in decline (Moreira Ramalho, 2023).

The Internet has played a key role in the irruption of populist movements. While social mobilizations were not born in the Digital Age, this technology has taken politics to a next level, providing organizations, candidates and political parties with new tools to organize campaigns, spread their ideology and get resources to support the activity (Schaub and Morisi, 2020). The Internet has also served to conduct disinformation campaigns to attack local and international dissidents, destabilize foreign governments, and subvert elections. Social media are ideal spaces to organize these actions because they facilitate the spread of unreliable information to a cluster of supporters that are predisposed to believe all the info without evidence and become agents with the determination to spread the messages, attacking at the same time, all those who question the accuracy of the news (Prier, 2017).

Thanks to the potentialities of social platforms to globally spread messages in an almost unrestricted, free and flexible form across diverse platforms and multimedia formats, the populist movements have adopted these platforms as key elements to develop a confronting discourse based on alternative-facts and partial truths in where reliable information concurs with baseless data with the aim to maximize or diminish social and economic problems (Engesser et al., 2017). They use false

profiles to manipulate public opinion and transform individuals with questioned backgrounds and controversial opinions into charismatic leaders with high popularity and millions of followers in their social media profiles (Kellner, 2016). Those *rending leadership* figures are created to become the interpreters and protectors of the *peoples' will*, capable of discerning who are the *bad people* and who are the *good ones*. “The bad hombres”, in the words of Donald Trump, when referring to Mexican migrants in the United States.

2.2. Populism, Medical Populism and Thaumaturgic populism

While there is not a consensus about a unique conception of populism (Moffitt, 2016), this research agrees with the formulation made by Cas Mudde (2017): populism is an ideology which stands on two main components: (1) an essential conflict among two classes or groups, one that is virtuous and another that is decadent and vicious and whose actions are damaging the society. The enemy tends to vary depending on the political ideology and the context of the country: it could be the globalization and the free market, international institutions such as the European Union, and The United States, for example, for the leftist populist governments in Latin America. (2) refers to how one group or charismatic leader is invested as the representative of *the people* or interpreter of the *peoples' will*. Then the struggle is amid the people or those who presume to represent the people's will and interests, and these “malicious organizations” and their supporters, considered by the populist regimens, as the enemy which have taken advantage from *the people* to accomplish their selfish corporate and political goals.

In recent years, some scholars have studied a particular form of populist discourse, the Medical Populist, based on the simplification or denial of scientific data or theories, mainly health research. Leaders polarized sanitary emergencies or mortal diseases by simplifying and spectacularizing scientific data in their discourse (Lasco and Curato, 2019). In this kind of discourse, politics tend to create opposed relations among *the people*, in the voice of López Obrador “El pueblo bueno” (The good people) and those medics or scientists that only care about their economic interests and that are willing to put on danger or negatively affect the population because of their sanitary measures (Lasco and Curato, 2019). Political leaders usually employ medical populist arguments to avoid criticism or accountability for their actions during sanitary emergencies or endemic health issues. Public policies based on medical populism, as the case of the Obrador and Bolsonaro during the first semester of 2020, usually turned into poor and ill-designed responses that exacerbated the crisis, incrementing the negative impact (Persson et al., 2022).

As it was possible to observe in the definition of populism and medical populism, the main aim of the discursive rhetoric is to create division among the public, trying at the same time to empower one ideology. Political leaders employ medical populist arguments to sectorize and divide the citizens regarding grave sanitary issues. They use argumentative elements such as banalization and the employment of pseudo-scientific data to impose their policies and to harass medics and journalists who criticize them. In this article, I want to propose the existence of another kind of populism, The Thaumaturgic Populism, a concept related with the medical populist's rhetoric but that attempts to create a polarized vision of the sanitary contingencies based on miraculous and religious bases. In this kind of populist rhetoric, leaders are invested with magical and/or religious superpowers where the logical or scientific factor is no longer the main issue adduced, but it is situated aside by arguments about the strengthening of leaders whose special abilities against the pandemics and diseases are beyond the Scientific explanation.

3. Methodology

The paper's methodology centers on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2010; Weiss and Wodak, 2003; van Dijk, 2015). A framework which considers documents (texts, images, videos) as elements of power, and whose aim is to connect the discourse embedded in those documents with social structures and ideologies. Regarding CDA as a scope to study relation of powers in politics, authors such as Magazzù (2022) states that analyzing politicians and representatives' writings and speeches is a resourceful way to understand, not just the motivations and policy objectives, but the ideologies that lie under these documents (van Dijk, 2014). Concerning medical populism, CDA has been used to understand how politicians construct their discourse around the management of medical crises to impose radical actions without some kind of scientific foundations (Speed and Mannion, 2020; Persson et al., 2022). I propose in this article to understand, using CDA, how medical populism manifested in Obrador and Bolsonaro's discourses related to the pandemic and how they recurred as well to other kind of rhetoric besides the medical one, which I label as thaumaturgic populism that employs a more messianic and supernatural argumentation. Fieldwork focused on gathering information published on social media profiles and online news. Because of the changing and flexible nature of the data shared on the Internet (Jones et al., 2015), in this research, the term *documents* embraces a wider meaning. It will not only refer to textual information, but to videos, images, animations, memes and audio files. This research follows the methodologic principles stated by Breeze (2011, p. 520) pondering the potential limitations of CDA research, (a) "obtain more representative overview across a larger sample of language" and (b) "be more disciplined and systematic in analyzing the text".

After a search on the Internet using terms related with the "pandemic", "cures", "sanitary measures", "Bolsonaro", "López Obrador" and "AMLO" in Portuguese and Spanish languages during June 2021 –revised in 2024–, 50 sources were selected. Then they were reduced to 37 registers (sample), 13 elements were excluded because of duplication and/or because they provided incomplete information. The sample comprises a temporal length from 2013 to 2021. While this study focused mainly on the presidential discourse during the appearance of the pandemic (2020), the sample comprised a wider temporality. This scope is imperative to understand how the thaumaturgic discourse emerged not as an aisled and exotic element, but as part of a discursive strategy to empower the presidential figure. A key objective of the fieldwork was to collect original sources when it was possible: tweets, videos and opinions made by both mandataries in their native languages (Spanish and Portuguese). After the selection, the sample was categorized using a simple coding system: Bolsonaro (B) and Lopez Obrador (A) and then the number of the register (1,2,3...). The final sample consisted of 37 units. There were 20 samples from Bolsonaro and 17 from López Obrador (See annexes). The selected units were arranged into two main categories of analysis: (a) Media and Discourse and (b) Medical and Thaumaturgy Populism. The analysis section grounded on the study of fragments from the presidents' discourses and opinions in their original language, and when necessary, a translation into English was provided.

4. Outcome and Discussion

4.1. Lopez Obrador and Bolsonaro. The Arrival to power

Latin America has a long tradition of populist presidents, many of them with leftist ideologies (Campos-Herrera and Reguero, 2019). Examples are plentiful, from Juan Manuel Peron in Argentina to the irruption of neo-populism movements at the beginning of the XXI century, labeled as the “Pink Tide” populism (Grigera, 2017): Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Lula Da Silva in Brazil, Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, recently Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in Mexico. These movements have been able to channel decades of socio-economic and cultural exclusion, interventionism from the United States and the negative impact of neoliberalism’s economic policies. They have been successful creating a confrontational discourse that triggers social polarization. In Mexico, for example, López Obrador and his followers have labeled all their critics as “Fifis”, a term traditionally employed to designate the upper classes in the country. However, besides this omnipresence of the left ideology in the Latin American political landscape, in recent years, the popularity of far-right ideology is rising. Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil won the presidential election thanks to the Brazilians’ founding disappointment on the economic policy outcomes undertaken by the leftist presidents Dilma Rousseff and Lula Da Silva, the public corruption and the high levels of criminality in the country (Londoño and Darlington, 2018). Bolsonaro, a retired military officer, employed a hardline towards delinquency which usually violates human rights and has caused thousands of casualties (Stargardter, 2019).

Bolsonaro’s electoral win could be explained partly because of the Brazilian’s apathy and disappointment on the leftist political and economic project that governed Brazil 2002-2014 (De Almeida, 2020) (Rousseff did not end her presidential term since she was removed from the presidency after an impeachment procedure in 2015). Bolsonaro built a successful rhetoric during his campaign based on political incorrectness. He made profuse use of social media, spreading memes and videos to criticize, mock and ironize when journalists questioned him about their controversial proposals, such as using excessive force to prosecute criminals (Carlo and Kamradt, 2018). He used his religious affinity to gain votes among Catholics and Evangelicals during the campaign. As president, he employed religious arguments to harass genre minorities (Neto, 2020).

Lopez Obrador (AMLO), as Bolsonaro, has made an extensive use of social platforms such as Twitter to spread his political agenda (Lopez-Chau et al., 2019). He was able to benefit from the sentiments of disappointment and skepticism towards the recent Mexican presidents’ economic policies (Calderon Hinojosa, PAN- Right and Peña Nieto PRI-Centre) and the violence and casualties caused by the Drug War. He created a discourse during the presidential campaign that positioned him as the only person who could solve Mexican traditional problems such as corruption, criminality and the lack of labor opportunities (Chihu Amparan, 2020). Under the label of *La Cuarta Transformación* (The Fourth Transformation), he established a series of measures to diminish the influence of corporations in the national economy and raise the control of the state in key economic sectors such as Oil and Energy. The Fourth Transformation’s rhetoric frequently uses moralizing elements in where AMLO praised his presidency as incorruptible with profound ethical values (Ulfgard and Villanueva, 2020), a speech that contrasts with the several cases of corruption, nepotism and misuse of public resources among the politicians and bureaucrats around him (Oré, 2020). While he promotes his agenda and openly protects the members of his cabinet and family from prosecution, he uses the state mechanism to attack democratic institutions, political adversaries and the media (Agren, 2020).

4.2. Media and discourse. Different ideologies, Same populist mechanism

While both presidents stand important ideological differences, they employed a similar apparatus to construct a rhetoric based on a prolific use of social media, social polarization, and the forging of a strong presidential figure. The following extracts exemplifies the particularities of Bolsonaro and Obrador' discourses.

[Example 1] Bolsonaro, in their public speeches, constantly refers to his military background. Praising the use of firepower and militarization to combat criminality. In 2017, he expressed that "If I am not prepared to kill, I am not a soldier" (Se eu não fosse preparado para matar, eu não seria militar) (B1). This phrase intends to project the idea of a heavy-duty person that is ready to act and to use radical measures to prosecute his objectives. For that reason, it is not surprising that he was compared with another populist politician that follows a hardline: Donald Trump. Both politicians frequently employ in their public appearances a terminology associated with the employment of lethal force and the use of Christian symbols to gain support amid conservatives (B6). Equally, both publicly promote themselves as representative of the peoples' will; they even have the support of the same conspiratorial group on the Internet: QAnon (B7).

[Example 2] In 2019, Bolsonaro used the hashtag "#ArmasPelaVida" (Weapons for life) on Twitter to support gun possession among the people. Then, he tweeted "The People's will is sovereign, and the Senate must respect it. The people want to sustain the president's decree" (vontade do povo é soberana e o Senado precisa respeitar. A população quer manter o decreto do presidente) (B9) this phrase exemplifies well how populists use the expression "people's will" to support controversial measures.

Lopez Obrador, as other politicians, incorporated social media as a key element to spread his political agenda (A6). However, he applied a change: the establishment of a communication strategy called *La Mañanera*. A daily press conference used to inform about Mexico's public issues but that has served to criticize dissidents, attack other communication media, and monopolize the discussion about key controversial issues in the country (A9). As it happens with most populist regimes, Bolsonaro and Lopez Obrador's rhetoric was based on the simplification of social problems and the polarization and division between two groups: (1) those virtuous citizens who support the president and (2) the critics and dissidents of the regime, commonly associated as the people's enemy. The enemies vary significantly between Bolsonaro and AMLO because of their different ideologies. For Bolsonaro among the people's enemies are the indigen communities that protect their land (B2) and members of the LGBT organizations.

[Example 3] Bolsonaro boasted that he is homophobic "I am homophobic, yes I am proud of it" (Sou homofóbico, sim, com muito orgulho) (B3).

[Example 4] On the contrary, Lopez Obrador uses an ambiguous language to label the Mexican people's enemy. Sometimes, he has declared that he is fighting against "The Mafia of Power" (La Mafia del Poder) (A2): an unclear label used as a framework to include all their critics and political adversaries.

[Example 5] In 2019, Obrador stated in a *Mañanera* "the end of the neoliberal politics with its anti-popular agenda and pillage" (A4). But besides their ideological bases, both presidents agreed to include the free media, non-governmental organizations that criticize their policies and their political adversaries as "peoples' enemies" (B4) (B5) (A5) (A7) (A10).

Bolsonaro and Obrador have taken advantage of digital media to harass journalists and local and foreign critics (B8). Both presidents enjoyed popularity in social media during their presidential terms (Bolsonaro already completed his presidency, while Obrador will hold his position until the end of September 2024). But they have also been questioned by independent organizations about paying artificial support or bots that approve their decisions and attack those who oppose them inside these virtual platforms (B10) (A08).

4.3. *Medical and Thaumaturgy Populism*

One of the particularities of the 2020 pandemic is that it occurred in a hypermediated context which practically allowed tracking the dispersion of the disease in real-time. However, this mediated background permitted as well, the diffusion of false and partial data on the Internet, that not only overlapped the reliable information but generated distrust towards the scientific evidence about the origin and gravity of the new virus. Populist leaders, such as Donald Trump in the United States, Obrador in Mexico, and Bolsonaro in Brazil, were worried that the social discontent and negative economic impacts caused by the social distancing policies and the suspension of non-essential works would have triggered a detriment of their popularity. In their opinions, the scientific community overreacts about the pandemic, people should continue with their normal life, work, and education activities.

They exploited disbeliefs towards science to develop a medical populist discourse shaped by a disdained attitude about the pandemic. Besides the testimonies, scientific evidence, and the official statement from the WHO regarding the appearance of a global pandemic at the beginning of 2020, AMLO and Bolsonaro denied the perils, diminished the potential risks for the population and made public statements in which they blamed the press and the scientific authorities for causing social panic (B16).

[Example 6] Bolsonaro said the media “spread fear” (espalhar pavor) (B14) and Obrador stated that the media wrote “alarmist reports” (reportajes alarmistas) (A16).

[Example 7] Lopez Obrador diminished the risks and attacked all those who did not agree with his attitude, refusing to use masks in public and inviting people to follow with their normal life (A11) “There are people who say, don’t give hugs. But yes, let’s hug. Nothing happens” (Hay quien dice que por lo del coronavirus no hay que abrazarse. Pero hay que abrazarse, no pasa nada) (A15). Lopez Obrador commented that “this disease is less deadly than influenza...” (A12).

Although the medical and thaumaturgic populism departs from traditional populism: (a) the social antagonization and (b) the consolidation of a leader or group that functions as “interpreter of the Peoples’ will”. I consider them as two different kinds of rhetoric since medical populism moves around an argumentative scientific sphere. The populist leaders are in a discursive dialectic to contest the medical research that contradicts their policies. In the case of the pandemic, for example, the use of sanitary masks or the application of social distancing policies. On the contrary, the thaumaturgic populism does not rely its justification on alternative evidence that contradicts scientists about some controversial decisions. But this kind of populist argumentation stands on endowment of supernatural or religious powers and legitimacy as in the case of *the royal touch* in the Middle Ages.

Besides the huge differences between the actual context and the Medieval time in Europe, the thaumaturgic populism found fertile land in those hoaxes, distrust and polarization. The social disruption caused by COVID-19 and the lack of quick responses towards the propagation and impact of this novel disease compelled people to consider the search of alternatives cures or explanations: such as an 'injection' of disinfectants and the destruction of telecommunication antennas considered as sources of COVID-19 contagion. In this kind of discourse, science is no longer in the discussion, but its foundations recurred to a religious and miraculous base. Political and social leaders under the thaumaturgic populism are strong charismatic figures immune to the disease with magic abilities capable of stopping or even curing it. Some of these elements are present in Bolsonaro and AMLO's discourse.

[Example 8] When Jair Bolsonaro was questioned about the high number of victims caused by COVID-19 in Brazil, he replied that "I regret the casualties, but we have to stop being a *faggot* country" (Lamento os mortos... -mais- tem que deixar de ser um país de maricas) (B11). Accusing their critics of being cowards who could not stand the situation. Jair Bolsonaro appears in the official discourse as a strong figure and hero immune to COVID-19.

[Example 09] Even when Bolsonaro got sick, he reinforced this idea of a resilient leader with supernatural powers that can stand the disease, "it will be only a little cold" (não vai ser uma gripezinha / resfriadinho) (B12) (B15).

[Example 10] When journalists asked Lopez-Gatell, the chief of the pandemic strategy in Mexico, about the potential risk if the president continued organizing public gatherings. He replied, "the strength of the President is moral; it is not a contagious force" (La fuerza del Presidente es moral, no es una fuerza de contagio) (A14).

A key element of the thaumaturgic populism is the use of magical, baseless, and eccentric cures for COVID-19. Considering potential treatments to reduce the impact of the pandemic. Bolsonaro endorses the use of medications such as chloroquine that without supervision could be potentially mortal (B17).

[Example 11] "Thanks to God, God is Brazilian, the cure is there" (Graças a Deus, Deus é brasileiro, a cura tá aí)(B20). Because for many of his followers believed that the pandemic was caused by the devil (O vírus é uma estratégia de satã) (B19), he organized a national campaign of praying and fasting (#JejumPeloBrasil) to protect Brazil from the expansion of the pandemic (B13).

[Example 12] AMLO provided a more eccentric, if possible, form of protection. He recommended the use of religious prints and prays, "stop enemy, that the heart of Jesus is with me" (detente enemigo, que el corazón de Jesús está conmigo) (A13) and having a proper moral behavior to avoid getting infected, "do not lie, do not steal, do not betray that helps a lot to not fall ill with covid" (No mentir, no robar, no traicionar: eso ayuda mucho para que no de el coronavirus) (A17).

5. Conclusions

Since the first outbreaks, the pandemic represented a serious problem for all governments, not just because of the prospective, now real, effects on the public health systems: the collapse of health infrastructure, the large number of people infected and the casualties, but the terrible economic and social consequences caused by the social distancing and quarantine policies: business closings, the massive loss of jobs, the cut of public spending, and scarcity of goods and inflation. Then many

governments opted to diminish the seriousness of the new disease. These were the cases of Lopez Obrador in Mexico and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. They refused to follow medical recommendations or to establish forced quarantines. They used social media to build a medical populist rhetoric based on false information in where they praised for alternative and exotic cures and refuted scientific arguments (Jaworsky and Qiaoan, 2021), and encouraging people to continue they normal lives without taking seriously medical advice and measures (Boberg et al., 2020; Brubaker, 2021).

This article focused on understanding the discourse of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and Jair Bolsonaro during the appearance of the 2020 pandemic, particularly how they kept and incremented their popularity, AMLO, 65% of approval, and Bolsonaro's popularity arose from 29% to 40%, despite their mismanagement of the pandemic. Both Mexico (around 333,000) and Brazil (699,000) are among the countries with the most victims caused by COVID-19 in the world (Johns Hopkins University, 2023). As it was possible to observe in this work, this approval was due in part to the development of a populist rhetoric that helped them not just to arrive at the presidency in their countries, but to impose controversial actions and generate polarization to empower their political figure. Although the arrival of COVID-19 stood a great challenge, particularly regarding the preservation of their national leadership, they were able to introduce novel rhetoric elements into their political agenda. This was the case of the employment of medical and thaumaturgic populism to simplify and trivialize scientific evidence about the real magnitude and danger of the pandemic.

Despite this negligent behavior, Bolsonaro (Mori, 2020) and Lopez Obrador (Lafuente and Beauregard, 2020) enjoyed public approval during the first semester of 2020. They were efficient to employ a new form of discourse based on thaumaturgy that nourished from polarization, disinformation, and global communication media; a rhetoric marked by the employment of traditional populist elements such as the peoples' will and the establishment of antagonistic groups, but with the introduction of novel topics related with the Christian religion, such as the possession of supernatural health, the capacity of cure the disease and the existence of miraculous medicines. Both presidents portrayed themselves as invulnerable and powerful individuals, immune to the virus. They encouraged people to employ mystical cures based on medallions, special prayers and moralistic sermons to avoid the contagion. At the same time, they used the media to attack those who criticized their disdained attitudes. These thaumaturgic presidents were able to channel the public discontent and skepticism towards international organizations such WHO, scientists, the media and the political adversaries which claimed for efficient measures against the pandemic. They not only evaded their responsibility but used the conflicted context to consolidate them as strong leaders with supernatural powers capable of facing and even curing diseases with magical methods.

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7. Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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9. Annexes

Annex 1. Populist discourse in Media.	
Jair Bolsonaro' populist discourse	
Fragment	Code
"Se eu não fosse preparado para matar, eu não seria militar." (Source www1.folha.uol.com.br , year 2017)	B1
"Em 2019 vamos desmarcar [a reserva indígena] Raposa Serra do Sol. Vamos dar fuzil e armas a todos os fazendeiros." (Source www.survivalbrasil.orgm 2016)	B2
"Sou homofóbico, sim, com muito orgulho." (Source https://catracalivre.com.br , 2013)	B3
"Vamos fuzilar a petralhada toda aqui do Acre!" (Source https://g1.globo.com , 2018)	B4
"O Globo". Querem derrubar o Governo, com chantagens, desinformações e vazamentos." (Source Twitter, 2019)	B5
"Senhor Presidente Trump, agradeço suas palavras de apoio. Juntos, sob a proteção de Deus, traremos mais prosperidade e progresso para nossos povos!" (Source Twitter, 2019)	B6
Brazil's QAnon followers see Bolsonaro as God's chosen messenger... "Those who oppose Bolsonaro are cast as enemies of the people, paedophiles, or evil promoters of such things." (Source www.theweek.in , 2021)	B7
"Não podemos aceitar que um presidente, Macron, dispare ataques descabidos e gratuitos à Amazônia... como se fôssemos uma colônia ou uma terra de ninguém." (Source Twitter, 2019)	B8
"A vontade do povo é soberana e o Senado precisa respeitar. A população quer manter o decreto do presidente." (Source Twitter, 2019)	B9
"Cerca de 22% dos seguidores de Bolsonaro no Twitter são fakes." (Source www.tecmundo.com.br , 2019)	B10
Andres Manuel López Obrador's populist discourse	
Fragment	Code
"Vamos a respetar al presidente Donald Trump, pero va a tener que respetarnos." (Source www.eleconomista.com.mx , 2018)	A1
"Estoy enfrentando a la mafia del poder. Estoy en contra de la corrupción." (Source, YouTube, 2017)	A2
"Si es necesario... vamos a convocar a un diálogo para que se otorgue amnistía, siempre y cuando se cuente con el apoyo de las víctimas." (Source www.animalpolitico.com , 12/03/2017)	A3
"Declaramos formalmente desde Palacio Nacional el fin de la política neoliberal." (Source www.elsoldemexico.com.mx , 2019)	A4
"Al día siguiente, el presidente @lopezobrador dedicó parte de su #Conferencia para atacar al diario y por la tarde se posicionó el hashtag #NarcoReforma." (Source Twitter, 2019)	A5

“Todavía no es potencia mundial y México ya compró una refinería. #AmloElMejorPresidenteDelMundo #VotoMasivoPorMorena2021” (Twitter, 05/24/2021)	A6
“La mejor receta para enfrentar esas resistencias de conservadores corruptos, la mejor fórmula de trabajar para el pueblo” (Source laotraopinion.com.mx, 2020)	A7
“No se ha contratado ningún tipo de servicio externo para las redes sociales del presidente de la República...proveedoras de seguidores automatizados o perfiles falsos -comúnmente llamados bots.” (Source eleconomista.com.mx, 2019)	A9
“Desde que accedió al cargo, el 1 de diciembre de 2018, AMLO ha dado más de 500 ruedas de prensa” (YouTube, 2021)	A9
“son prudentes (periodistas) porque aquí los están viendo y si ustedes se pasan, pues, ya saben lo que sucede.” (Source lopezobrador.org.mx, 2019)	A10

Annex 2. COVID-19 and Thaumaturgic discourse.

Jair Bolsonaro' populist discourse

Fragment	Code
“Tudo agora é pandemia, tem que acabar com esse negócio, pô. Lamento os mortos, lamento... Tem que deixar de ser um país de maricas” (Source YouTube, 11/11/2020)	B11
“Depois da facada, não vai ser uma gripezinha que vai me derrubar não, tá ok?” (Source https://g1.globo.com , 03/20/20)	B12
“Os maiores líderes evangélicos do país, representando 70 milhões de brasileiros, atenderam ao pedido do pres. JAIR MESSIAS BOLSONARO, e convocam o Exército de Cristo para A MAIOR CAMPANHA DE JEJUM E ORAÇÃO JÁ VISTA NA HISTÓRIA DO BRASIL! #JejumPeloBrasil com @jairbolsonaro!” (Source Twitter, 04/04/2020)	B13
“Ele também fez um apelo pela “volta à normalidade” e culpou a imprensa por “espalhar pavor.” (Source g1.globo.com, 03/25/2020)	B14
“meu caso particular pelo menos histórico 03:08 de atleta caso fosse contaminado pelo 03:11 vírus não precisaria me preocupar nada 03:15 sentiria ou seria quando muito acometido 03:19 de 03:19 a linha ou resfriadinho como bem disse.” (Source YouTube, 03/24/2020)	B15
“dos meios de comunicação foram na 01:10 contramão espalharam exatamente a 01:13 sensação de pavor tendo como carro-chefe.” (Source, 03/24/2020)	B16
“AconteceunaSaúde - O @minsaude criou um protocolo orientando o uso da #cloroquina e da #hidroxicloroquina para pacientes graves internados por causa do #coronavírus” (Source, 03/29/2020)	B17
“Brevemente o povo saberá que foi enganado por esses governadores e por grande parte da mídia na questão do coronavírus”, disse Bolsonaro. (Source https://economia.uol.com.br , 3/23/2020)	B18
“O vírus é uma estratégia de satã, anunciou Edir Macedo, o fundador da poderosa Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus.” (Source www.poder360.com.br , 04/03/2020)	B19

<p>“Graças a Deus, Deus é brasileiro, a cura tá aí — disse Bolsonaro, sendo saudado por populares.” (Source br.financas.yahoo.com, 03/29/2020)</p>	<p>B20</p>
<p>Andres Manuel López Obrador’s populist discourse</p>	
<p>Fragment</p>	<p>Code</p>
<p>“vamos a seguir haciendo la vida normal y en su momento se les va a decir cuándo hay que guardarnos.” (Source, www.animalpolitico.com, 03/23/2020)</p>	<p>A11</p>
<p>“No es, según la información que se tiene, algo terrible, fatal ni siquiera es equivalente a la influenza... para evitar que haya amarillismo, que no haya exageraciones para que no haya una psicosis colectiva.” (Twitter, 02/28/2020)</p>	<p>A12</p>
<p>“Cuando AMLO mostró el “detente” y dijo que contra el Covid ayuda mucho “no mentir y no robar” (Source, www.eluniversal.com.mx, 03/18/2020)</p>	<p>A13</p>
<p>“¿Si llegara a ser portador y va a las zonas de alta marginación, podría contagiar?”, preguntó una periodista. - “La fuerza del Presidente es moral, no es una fuerza de contagio” dijo López-Gatell.” (Source www.eluniversal.com.mx, 03/16/2020)</p>	<p>A14</p>
<p>“Hay quien dice que por lo de coronavirus no hay que abrazarse. Pero hay que abrazarse, no pasa nada.” (Source, www.milenio.com, 03/10/2020)</p>	<p>A15</p>
<p>“López Obrador incluso calificó la información proveniente de estos medios como “reportajes alarmistas.” (Source, politica.expansion.mx, 05/15/2020)</p>	<p>A16</p>
<p>“No mentir, no robar, no traicionar: eso ayuda mucho para que no dé el coronavirus.” (Source, Twitter, 06/04/2020)</p>	<p>A17</p>