

Ethical critique in political discourse

Crítica ética en el discurso político

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Abstract

In recent years, we have witnessed a drastic wave of totalitarian regimes, as noted by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) in the book entitled *How Democracies Die*. The authors provide historical examples of democratic rupture in the last one hundred years: from Hitler and Mussolini in the 1930s to the current populist wave of right-wing extremism in Europe, preceded by the military dictatorships of Latin America in the 1970s. The dizzying growth of Brazil's new right wing, particularly the democratic far right, which is spearheaded by current president Jair Bolsonaro as the "honest politician" who stands in opposition to the corrupt political class. Regarding the present context of abuse of power, denial, and fake news, I decided to reflect upon the issue of ethics, more specifically of ethical critique in political discourse.

Keywords: Ethical critique, ethics and moral, political discourse, critical discourse analysis.

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Resumen

En los últimos años, hemos sido testigos de una ola drástica de regímenes totalitarios, como lo señalan Levitsky y Ziblatt (2018) en el libro titulado *Cómo mueren las democracias*. Los autores brindan ejemplos históricos de ruptura democrática en los últimos cien años: desde Hitler y Mussolini en la década de 1930 hasta la actual ola populista de extrema derecha en Europa, precedida por las dictaduras militares de América Latina en la década de 1970. El crecimiento vertiginoso de la nueva derecha de Brasil que vemos hoy, particularmente la extrema derecha antidemocrática, está encabezado por el actual presidente Jair Bolsonaro, considerado como un “político honesto”, opuesto a la clase política corrupta. Considerando el presente contexto de abuso de poder, negación, y fake news, decidí reflexionar sobre el tema de la ética, más específicamente de la crítica ética en el discurso político.

Palabras clave: Crítica ética, ética y moral, discurso político, análisis crítico del discurso.

Introduction

The research project “Desnaturalization of *oppressive social practices: a critical-discursive study*” is a collaborative project of Nepel/UFMT¹. The main purpose is to investigate social, cultural, political, and ideological discursive practices, with a focus on emancipation and social transformation. The repercussions of the Nepel researches range from the denaturalization of ideological discourses to the constitution of mobilizing agencies and transforming of social practices.

In recent years, we have witnessed a drastic wave of totalitarian regimes, as noted by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) in the book entitled *How Democracies Die*. The authors provide historical examples of democratic rupture in the last one hundred years: from Hitler and Mussolini in the 1930s to the current populist wave of right-wing extremism in Europe, preceded by the military dictatorships of Latin America in the 1970s.

The dizzying growth of Brazil’s new right wing, particularly the anti-democratic far right, was started by current president Jair Bolsonaro as the “honest politician” who stands in opposition to the corrupt political class. Regarding this context of

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abuse of power, denial and fake news, I decided to reflect upon the issue of ethics, more specifically of ethical critique in political discourse.

In this paper, I discuss ethical critique in political discourse (Barros, 2021a; 2021 b). The text is divided into three parts. In the first one, I present a brief reflection on ethics and morals, bringing some concepts from ancient and post-modern philosophers. Next, I explain ethics and political discourse, including some clippings of President Jair Bolsonaro's speech. And finally, in the third part, I present the closing remarks.

Ethics and morals: brief consideration

The concept of ethics emerged in Greece, having been proposed by philosophers who discussed the “mysteries of the universe and of cosmic forces (cosmology), for the moral essence and character of individuals” (Galvão, 2002:4). From the greek word *éthica*, *ethos*, which means *way of being*, ethics can be defined as the study of judgments on a person's conduct and moral behavior. Ethics is, therefore, the philosophical reflection of morality, a theoretical reasoning of the moral behavior of human beings in society. Morality, on the other hand, entails rules, principles and norms of conduct. Ethics and morality are objects of study in various fields of humanities and philosophy. Comte-Sponville & Ferry (1998) offer useful definitions of these two terms. When referring to morality, the question we should ask is “How should I act?” and, when it comes to ethics, “What life do I want to live?”. In this case, morality refers to duty and ethics to happiness, to well-being.

The Greek philosopher Socrates is known as the father of ethics. Socratic ethics encompasses values such as goodness and justice with a view to establishing order. Socrates was interested in reflecting on issues that highlighted virtue, its essence, value and obligation. Plato, Socrates' disciple, believed that all human beings should seek happiness. Their dialogues about life after death show that happiness would be found beyond this life. According to Valls (1994: 25), the ideal of Plato's virtuous man would be to adhere to the divine.

In his work *The Republic*, Plato refers to ethics as a political ideal that emanates from an individual's soul, in other words, to moral psychology. From this perspective, the relationship between ethics and politics would be based on a person's identity, i.e., the ethical interiority of *Being* would come into existence within the political domain.

Kant (1995) defines “moral” based on the Latin *mores*, which means conduct, practice and action. It is a set of norms that regulate individual behavior. Moral law, according to the philosopher, comes from reason rather than from experience, being capable of leading human beings on a different direction to the one imposed by norm. When we break certain norms, for example, we may be confronted with an inner guilt caused by the use of reason. It is through culture, customs, religion and economy that norms change. One may conclude, then, that a change in social structure, for instance, may trigger a change in moral conduct, considering that morality has a social character.

For a better understanding of ethics and morals, an illustrative table is presented below:

| ETHICS | MORALS |
|--|--|
| Science that studies morality. | It has a normative character. |
| Philosophical reflection on morality, of a theoretical nature. | It's temporary because it is cultural. |
| It's permanent, universal. | It considers aspects of specific conducts. It's directly related to habits and customs of groups. |

In the next section, I discuss the concept of ethics presented by the philosophers Lévinas and Dussel.

The ethics of the Other

Emmanuel Lévinas (2004) discusses the issue of ethics, with a specific focus on the Ethics of the Other. Lévinas is the most innovative Jewish Lithuanian-French thinker of the 20th century, whose trajectory was marked by the suffering and pain of the six million Jews murdered by German National Socialism. The horrors of the Holocaust are recorded in his book *Entre Nous: Essays on Thinking-Of-The-Other*.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas (1988) presents the issue of subjectivity based on the centrality of the Other, unlike Kant and Descartes, who saw the “I” as a rational basis (“I think, therefore I am”), a sovereign, autonomous subject. Ethics is then understood as a result of the relationship with the Other as otherness. Alterity comes from the Latin *alteritas* (to be the other). It consists of acknowledging the anguish and suffering of human beings, i.e., being in another

person's shoes. The nature of Levinasian ethics implies, therefore, the ability to welcome the other in their otherness, that is, to be concerned with the Other.

In this same view, the philosopher Enrique Dussel proposes his *Ethics of Liberation* as an ethics of life. It is “an ethics for everyday life, from the perspective and in the interests of the *immense majority of humanity excluded by globalization*” (Dussel, 1977). This philosopher develops an ethical reasoning by taking sides with the victims, the oppressed ones, the suffering peoples of South America. His understanding of ethics arises from his own suffering reality. Dussel contends that it is in modern European philosophy, in the wake of Descartes, that all men and their cultures are viewed as manipulable beings. Eurocentrism has, in his view, imposed itself on the periphery for five centuries. Therefore, Dussel raises the question of whether the time has come to put an end to the geopolitical dominance of the center or whether we can glimpse a process of liberation from the periphery. He draws attention to the act of thinking about philosophy, not from the perspective of the center, of political, economic, and military power, but beyond the borders of the central world. It is necessary to think, then, of the “convicts of the earth”², of everything that has been denied to the victims. As Caselas (2009: 67) aptly acknowledges, victims find themselves far from the hegemonic system and can be identified in three ways: “a) as being oppressed; b) as being excluded (and aware of this fact); c) those who are not directly dominated are materially victimized (the poor, the marginal urban masses)”.

Inspired by Lévinas, Dussel (1977) presents his version of the *Other*, as alterity. By lending him the concept, he turns to the Latin American ethical-political question, in favor of the “condemned of the earth” the excluded ones. The Other, according to him, “is the exteriority of all totality because it is free” (Dussel, 1977:50). Liberty is seen by the philosopher as an unconditional factor in relation to the world that has always placed itself at the center. According to Dussel (1977:65), man needs to have an ethical conscience, understood here as “the ability to hear the voice of the other. However, the philosopher clarifies that to hear the voice of the other it is necessary that “we are atheists of the system”. It is the one who can assume the pain and cause of the Other. It is taking for oneself, it is taking responsibility for the Other. Responsibility here means to act with courage, it is to have full capacity to see the structure of the system and not remain silent.

In the next section, I discuss postmodern ethics.

2 In reference to Franz Fanon's (1968) work.

Bauman and postmodern ethics

Bauman³ (1997), in his book *Postmodern Ethics*, presents a scathing critique of ethics. The author considers postmodern ethics as the Age of Morals and *Morality*, which presents a duality when referring to modern ethics and “postmodern” ethics, while converging as regards the maintenance of social control. By disputing that the main idea behind modern ethics lies with Durkheim, Bauman insists that man has an ethical capacity, though only through socialization promoted by society will he manage to turn into a social being.

In drawing on postmodern ethics, Bauman states that it is more fluid, devoid of reference. The postmodern “revolution” of ethics is hence viewed as doubtful. In other words, postmodernity is nothing more than the death of the ethical, replaced by the notion of aesthetics. Ethics went on to be “denied and mocked” thrown in the trash of history. In this sense, human beings urgently need stricter norms of conduct to guide their relationships in society, whose life and actions depend on what can and should be done.

Human beings are still crisscrossed by problems, sometimes paradoxical ones, that seem impossible to solve. Wars, abortion, euthanasia, exploitation of natural resources and pandemics are just a few examples. As Hans Jonas (2006) rightly points out, what is at stake is not a person who is blind or indifferent to the problems of humanity, but the radical skeptic who does not accept the possibility of acting rationally towards his/her mandatory moral duties. Extremists seldom accept ethical issues since they do not believe in morally correct conducts. How, then, may a radical skeptic be persuaded, through arguments, of their atrocities? Would the debate regarding ethics and morality not be ultimately superimposed on metaphysics? As Hans Jonas aptly puts it, why, after all, are we here? This, though, merits further analysis.

Bauman talks about “*moral uncertainty*” what we and others do has “side effects” that can annihilate any positive purpose and produce suffering that no one can imagine. It can even harm people far away or who will live in the future

3 According to Silva (2013), Zygmunt Bauman, from a Jewish family, was born in 1925, in the city of Poznan, Poland. In 1939, he escaped the Nazi invasion, moving to the Soviet Union (still and joins the army and fights on the Russian front). In 1950 he began his academic career and became a professor in Warsaw. In 1968 he is exiled due to the anti-Semitic campaign promoted by the communist authorities. In the 1970s, he moved to England and took up a professorship at the University of Leeds. In 1990 he retires from the professorship in Leeds.

without even imagining that we can find them. Even knowing all the moral conducts, we are far from avoiding any disastrous attitude. As the power of the human being increases, ethics fades and falls to the ground. In the sociologist's light, when responsibility is denied and given back, we feel like a load too heavy to carry alone. We need an authority that we can trust and obey, "an authority that can be held responsible for the adequacy of our choices and thus, at least, share something of our excessive responsibility" (Bauman, 1997:27).

Postmodernity, according to the philosopher, is characterized as '*morality without an ethical code*'. When faced with our choices and disastrous consequences, we no longer wait for the wisdom of legislators to free us from moral ambivalence and decision uncertainty. He also adds that it is in society that the moral competence of its members becomes possible and not vice versa. In his words, "there will be no moral individuals if not for the exercise training work carried out by society" (Bauman, 1997:41). Finding an ethical code that responds to the ethical questions of human beings is what characterizes, according to the author, the ethical thinking of postmodernity.

The contributions of Lévinas, Dussel and Bauman, profiled here, contribute to a reflection and analysis of ethical criticism in political discourse. The reflections undertaken by them converge regarding the exteriority of the Other as alterity, of paramount importance for understanding the social structures of power and oppression. Dussel speaks to the "*dammned of the earth*" to the excluded from the world that has always placed itself at the center. In the perspective of postmodernity, Bauman considers ethics as the 'age of morals'. It brings a discussion about *microethics*, approaching Lévinas regarding the responsibility of the moral subject or responsibility of the Other. I agree with both scholars in relation to the centrality of the Other, as pointed out by Lévinas, and later accepted by Dussel and Bauman. Ethics, in this turn, consists of putting oneself in the place of the Other, being able to welcome him in his alterity, understanding suffering from the relationship with the Other.

Ethics and political discourse

The term *discourse ethics* is characterized as a philosophical position focused on argumentation (in this case, discourse). It aims to resolve the moral dilemmas and conflicts of society. Discourse ethics is not concerned with the creation/elaboration of ethical or moral principles. On the contrary, it focuses on resolving conflicts over norms (Siebeneichler, 2018). It has its origins in the theories defended by Karl-Otto Apel (1998) and Jürgen Habermas (1983).

According to Siebeneichler (2018), ethics of discourse became a central theme in the reflections of these two philosophers. Both understood discourse ethics as a program, “supported by validity claims to be rationally discussed” (Siebeneichler, 2018: 71). It brings up reflections focused on practical reason, as Kant well assured. However, in the light of Herrero (2001), Habermas distanced himself from Kantian subjective ethics because he understood that the object of reflection of ethics should be argumentation, considering that the validity of norms stems from an argumentative proposal, which is the moral principle admitted by Habermas. All argumentation takes place within a real community of communication. Communicative action is seen as a dialectical process of cooperation between speakers to coordinate emancipatory actions.

In the theory of Communicative Action, Habermas proposes the discourse ethics, based on the intersubjective-rationality of the choice of values among subjects who cooperate in the search for truth. The philosopher believes that discourse ethics should be concerned with procedural and normative issues, with practical discourse rather than theoretical discourse. For this, he proposes an argumentative language capable of basing moral norms. Discourse ethics presented by Habermas (1983), as a philosophical position, contributed greatly to the construction of Fairclough’s thought about ethical critique in political discourse, more specifically, in the analysis of political discourse focused on the criticism of the actions of public agents.

I see political discourse as the way in which public agents present their points of view and debate them. This is a thought defended since Aristotle, who sees in the power of *logos*, of the word, the art of expressing about what should be done and what should be avoided. In the analysis of political discourse, two aspects are considered by Fairclough (2011:3): *normative criticism and exploratory criticism*. Normative criticism “assesses social beliefs and practices as true or false, beneficial or harmful, etc”. Explanatory criticism, on the other hand, analyzes social reality, how it is maintained or changed, and it “seeks to understand what makes a given social order work, what is clearly necessary, if it is to be changed to improve human well-being” (Ibiden:3). In my point of view, both normative and exploratory criticisms are necessary in critical social research once they start from judgments of society or aspects of social life.

Fairclough & Fairclough (2011, 2018) assure ethical critique in political discourse analysis, based on the theory of argumentation (Walton, 2005:8). The theory of argumentation, according to Walton, is an approach that consists “in collecting arguments of all kinds, analyzing them, evaluating them and bringing

them into a normative form in an argumentation scheme". According to Walton, argumentation schemes are argumentation instruments that allow the critical evaluation of a point of view and the reasons presented in support of it. Every scheme has a set of critical questions that, according to the author, represent the revocability conditions and weaknesses that the interlocutor uses to question the argument and assess its strength.

According to Fairclough & Fairclough (2018), the theory of argumentation is considered relevant in ethical critique analysis because the focus on text analysis is centered on *normative and explanatory* critique, providing the critical discourse analyst with tools to assess and critique arguments by powerful political agents that are not always challenged. In this sense, these authors assert that *practical argumentation* for the analysis of political discourse may involve other forms of analysis (such as the analysis of representations).

Although Walton's approach is accepted in the analysis of political discourse, I defend Fairclough's (2003) view as more relevant, given *semiosis' potential* for meaning production. A text may contain extralinguistic elements that do not appear explicitly, in which case the analyst may run the risk of producing incomplete assumptions and conclusions.

I also consider relevant the inclusion of the category of *representational meaning* in the analysis of political discourse, as well as those of *identification meaning* and *action meaning*, given the simultaneous occurrence of these categories in texts. It is worth mentioning that the representational meaning of discourse is associated with Halliday's (1994) ideational metafunction. In this case, the systemic-functional linguistics (SFL) approach contributes positively to identifying linguistic materiality in texts.

In addition to SFL, the appraisal system theory (Martin & White, 2005) can be useful in analyzing the speaker's *positive* or *negative appraisal statements*. According to Martin and Rose (2003/2007), the appraisal system is one of the main semantic-discursive resources as far as assessing people's behavior is concerned, including their feelings. Furthermore, Martin & White (2005) contend that the appraisal approach describes the way in which language is used in assessment processes. In other words, the speaker adopts a certain attitude and builds his/her own authorial identity.

The appraisal system is composed of three domains: a) *attitude*; b) *gradation*; and c) *engagement*. The attitude category translates the speaker's emotional

reactions, judgment of behavior and evaluation of a given event or description of some fact. Attitude, according to Martin & White (2005), stands out in the evaluation process because it involves three subsystems: (i) *affection*; ii) *judgment*; and iii) *appreciation*.

According to Martin & White (2005), the judgment subsystem involves the evaluation of morality, legality, normality, determined by the culture, experiences and individual beliefs. It is associated with ethics, whose normative analysis of human behavior involves rules or conventions of behavior. For example, if someone says: “The deputy stole something” he is making a judgment about the moral conduct of a public agent. In this case, the critical discourse analyst is responsible for investigating if the evidence is confirmed or not. The appreciation subsystem, on the other hand, refers to the qualities of the things that are evaluated. It is a question here of evaluating non-conscious, physical or semiotic things. When we evaluate a car eg. *What a beautiful car!* we are making an appreciation.

Following are some clippings of Jair Bolsonaro’s speech about the elections in 2022. Bolsonaro is a public agent, with constitutional duties. He was elected in 2018. The elections were marked by fake news, accusations of embezzlement of public funds, as well as by claims of morality, fight against corruption, family values and “God above all else”, Bolsonaro’s statements are usually addressed to the public in the mornings, at a place close to the Alvorada Palace (popularly known as ‘*cercadinho*’ or enclosure).

During his almost four-year term, the president has made vehement criticisms about the use of electronic voting machines. In his words: “**In Brazil, if we have electronic voting in 2022 it will be the same. Fraud exists**” (G1.globo.com - 07/01/2021). We can notice the use of the conditional conjunction “*if*”. According to him, the elections will be the same as in the past, through fraud. Bolsonaro assures that Brazil’s elections had been marred by fraud. However, he doesn’t mention that he was elected through fraud. He also claims: “**or we do clean elections, or we don’t have elections**” (G1.globo.com - 18/01/2021). The presence of alternative/disjunctive conjunctions “*or*”, linking two sentences, clearly shows a type of threat. It’s also interesting to highlight the deletion of the pronoun “*we*” in this sentence: “**either [we] make clean elections or [we] don’t have elections**” . This is a discursive strategy to omit the agent, in this case Bolsonaro himself.

Recently Bolsonaro attacked the Supreme Electoral Court (SEC). He said: “**If there is no audit, there won’t be elections**” (G1.globo.com - 19/05/22).

The frequent use of conditional conjunctions and negative sentences shows that Bolsonaro threatens the SEC. It reveals that the president has greatly affected democratic institutions in Brazil. These sentences evoke a political discourse typical of right-wing extremism, fundamentally anti-democratic in nature. It is associated with judgment subsystem (Martin and White, 2005), which involves evaluation of morality, legality, normality, determined by culture, experiences and individual beliefs. Moreover, they also show that Bolsonaro, as a public agent, is not concerned with acting morally and ethically towards the population which elected him. Even though he was approved at the ballots to solve the country's problems, he stands against the ethical and moral values that every citizen needs to follow. His lexicogrammatical choices signal a lack of ethical value.

According to Van Dijk (2012), political discourse does not simply encompass linguistic materiality, endowed with meanings, rules and interaction strategies, but also knowledge of the context and the ideologies of speakers. Van Dijk also states that the discursive reproduction of power and domination occurs when one has access to power: the right choice of setting, control of communicative events and of target audience of speeches, especially in politics. For this reason, he feels more comfortable giving interviews almost always at a place close to the Alvorada Palace. His audience is ideologically connected to him. As Hans Jonas rightly points out, the radical skeptic does not agree to act rationally towards his moral duties because he/she does not believe in a morally correct conduct. It is no wonder that Bauman (1997) considers postmodernity the age of morals, with ethics being denied, thrown in the trash of history.

Closing remarks

As already mentioned, the article is part of the research project “Denaturalization of oppressive social practices: a critical discursive study” of the Center for Emancipatory Studies and Research in Language/Nepel/UFMT. Our main goal is to create new possibilities for change, to fight against oppressive forces. In regarding the political discourse analysis, it is important to include the meanings of discourse, SFL and the appraisal system. The concepts presented by these approaches can be useful in assessing the positive or negative statements of political agents, including their behavior and feelings. Ethical critique in CDA can be a promising proposal, as it opens up possibilities for a discussion on the ethical and moral dimensions of society, with a particular focus on the discursive analysis of political agents.

It's also relevant to consider the *social practice of insurgency* as a guiding principle in popular social movements that translate the dissatisfaction of oppressed groups in the face of social reality. We can mention the anti-racist resistance movements that took place in the United States and in the world, namely, '*black lives matter*'. In October/2, there will be elections in Brazil. Bolsonaro has been fighting in favor of a *coup d'état*. It is important that all people struggle against the right-wing extremism that has plagued the world, in favor of a fair and democratic election. The struggles have a more radical dimension in the action, "so that it is insurgent in the territory of ideas, values and ideologies that underlie these social visions of the world" (Streck & Morett, 2013: 48). Critical ethics in political discourse has never been so relevant in the current conjuncture. We need ethical renewal in our ways of thinking and acting. Changes in our system of knowledge and beliefs can lead to become an instrument of struggle, and ideals such as liberty, justice, equality, and fraternity must be guaranteed.

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