HISTORIA MAGISTRA VITAE: ROME AS THE THEME OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY IN LIGHT OF BRAZIL TODAY

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Abstract:

This article presents partial results of a larger project intending to analyze the way in which "themes" of Roman Politics are (re)appropriated in Brazil to "explain" its "current situation", either through didactic-pedagogical discourses or current political discussions. A documental corpus was chosen for this research, composed of posts on the internet in which I identify the most recurring and disseminated items regarding this issue in Brazilian society. My starting point is that these discourses have made use of a perception that is deeply rooted in Western political imaginary, i.e., Rome represents a symbol of "political and moral decadence", strongly emphasizing topics such as "corruption", "unrestrained desire for power", "political manipulation" and "the passivity of the masses". The purpose of the research is to identify which appropriations are currently seen in Brazilian society and what kind of view regarding this society is disseminated from this kind of reading on the Roman world.

Key words

Rome – Decadence – Corruption – Politics – Brazil today

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Resumo

Este artigo apresenta resultados parciais de um projeto maior que pretende analisar a forma como "tópicos" da Política Romana são (re)apropriados no Brasil para "explicar" a sua "realidade atual", quer seja pelo discurso didático-pedagógico, quer seja pela discussão política contemporânea. Para essa pesquisa, optei por um corpus documental composto por postagens feitas na internet, por intermédio das quais procuro identificar os itens mais recorrentes e difundidos sobre a questão na sociedade brasileira contemporânea. Parto do princípio de que estes diversos discursos têm feito uso de uma percepção muito arraigada no imaginário político ocidental que tem Roma como um símbolo de "decadência moral e política", com forte ênfase em temas como "corrupção", "ambição desenfreada pelo poder", "manipulação política" e "passividade das massas". Essa pesquisa pretende identificar quais apropriações são atualmente correntes na sociedade brasileira e que visão dessa sociedade é transmitida a partir dessa leitura do mundo romano.

Palavras-chave

Roma – Decadência – Corrupção – Política – Brasil Atual

The present article displays the partial results of a larger project that analyzes the way in which "themes" regarding Roman Politics are (re)appropriated in Brazil to "explain" its "current situation", either through didactic-pedagogical discourses or current political discussions. A documental corpus was chosen for this research, composed of posts on the internet – whose method for collecting and analyzing data will be explained below - in which I identify the most recurring and disseminated items regarding the issue in Brazilian society.

The idea for this research began in 2015. The topic was on the forefront of my academic inquiries when on December 15, 2015 the Brazilian Federal Police (PF) released a huge operation called *Operation Car Wash* (*Operacao Lava Jato*), with 53 search and seizure warrants issued by the Federal Supreme Court. One of the main targets was the president of the House of Representatives, Eduardo Cunha. Surprisingly (to many people, including myself), the PF operation was called *Operation Catiline*. Due to its peculiar name, the media at the time hastened to try to explain the origin of the word. The newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo,* for instance, in an article entitled "PF Operation baptized Catiline in reference to corrupt Roman Senator, says

> Operation Catiline, which began this Tuesday, the 15th, by the Federal Police, recalls a series of speeches by Consul Marc Tullius Cicero against the noble conspirator Lucius Sergius Catilina who planned to overthrow the Roman government in 63 BC. The "catalines" are considered masterpieces in rhetoric. **One of the most celebrated excerpts, revisited today, seems to have foreseen the Brazil of Eduardo Cunha and Dilma Rousseff**.[2]

Later, the article available online on the newspaper site intersperses excerpts from the Catalines[3] and references to actions by Representative Eduardo Cunha. In one of these, it attempts to "explain" who the Catiline described by Cicero is in the following manner:

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[2] *O Estado de S. Paulo.* "Operação da PF é batizada de Catilinárias, em referência a senador romano corrupto" ("PF Operation is dubbed Catiline recalling a corrupt Roman senator"), São Paulo, December 15, 2015, available at: <https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/fausto-macedo/operacao-da-pf-e-batizada-de-catilinarias-em-referencia-a-senador-romano-corrupto/> Accessed September 3, 2019. All emphasis in bold in quotations are the responsibility of the author of this article.

[3] In fact, these are small additions supposedly taken from the First Cataline Oration, though the newspaper does not quite indicate the source used for quotations.

In the speeches, **Catiline is described as an exposed man, but one who resists in his anarchist and supposedly anti public interest campaign** […]

In the Ethics Council, **Cunha is accused of lying to his peers by telling them he did not have accounts in Switzerland.** Investigations carried out by the Attorney General (PGR) show that a portion of the money kept abroad seemed to have been embezzled through a Petrobras contract.

Other national newspapers also joined the efforts to "explain" the origin of the PF Operation nickname, but practically repeated the same information and allusions found in the *Estadão*, and actually included identical sentences. Most likely this occurred because the source of information was the same, in other words, the *Agência Brasil*, a public communication medium associated to *Empresa Brasileira de Comunicações* (Brazilian Communications Corporation) which, in its turn, is affiliated to the *Secretaria de Comunicação Social da Presidência da República* (Secom – Social Communication Department of the Presidency). Besides the newspaper articles, the name given to the PF action was the object of interpretation by some Brazilian columnists and bloggers. In one example we read the following:

More tangible than anything the Federal Police may have found in Eduardo Cunha's house **is the umbilical relationship that links the Roman traitor Catiline to the (still) current president of the House**. […]

Despite the plus two thousand years between the emergence of the two, **the similarities are blatant**. […]

The two representatives are united, despite the abyss in centuries that separates them, by the same **age-old desire for money and power at all costs that are shared by men of inferior character**. Catiline might just be the father of **the demagogue politician**, brandishing impassioned speeches in defense of the people, while serious doubts hang over his character […]

What **Brazil is experiencing today** with the unpalatable presence of Eduardo Cunha is a sort of **super production remake of what the Roman Empire experienced with Catiline and his cohorts**. The main difference is that our Cicero, Rodrigo Janot, is a far cry from being a staunch defender of justice.[4]

We could go on listing the quotations, but for the purpose of this introduction, the abovementioned excerpts are quite enough. First of all, to a historian familiar with Roman history, the excerpts would alone call attention for the mistakes they

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[4] FERNANDES, Carlos. As semelhanças entre Cunha e Catilina. (The similarities between Cunha and Catiline) In.: *Diário do Centro do Mundo*, December 15, 2015, available at <https://www.diariodocentrodomundo.com.br/as-semelhancas-entre-cunha-e-catilina-por-carlos-fernandes/>, accessed September 20, 2019

contain – some quite eloquent, such as the classification of Catiline as an "anarchist", and the inclusion of the Catiline episodes during the Roman Empire. However, my concern does not lie merely in calling out the historical statements in the material under study, but in pointing out two forms of using History, especially Roman history, contained therein: the first refers to the use of "topics" related to Roman Politics to interpret Brazilian reality through an "intuitive method" according to which the comparison with a past historical society – in search of analogies and likeness – would be the key to interpret the present. The second, associated to the first, is seen in the tendency to search for a sort of universality of political behavior in the past, especially concerning the supposed identification of "invariable characteristics" such as "corruption" and "unfettered ambition" for "power" and/or "money", in which Rome becomes a constant reference.[5]

As a researcher concerned with the study of Roman politics – especially the understanding of the "crisis" of the Republic during the 1st Century BC, a topic for which the Catilines are an indispensable source – the reference to the Catilines could not be ignored. Nevertheless, although it is unusual, it did not surprise me since it simply reinforced an observation which I had already been making for a while about the way in which topics related to Roman History, in different periods and discursive mediums, constantly came up as items that "illustrated" and "explained" situations regarding Brazilian politics today. Thus, the episode mentioned above boosted my interest in the subject and drove the research that is now underway.

Rome and the Imaginary

To put this research in motion, the concept of social imaginary was used. Since the term "imaginary" has different and even conflicting meanings, it is pivotal that the meaning used here be clarified.

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[5] This can be illustrated by the following comment taken from an article on the subject posted on the internet: "History repeats itself… Actions practiced today by those in power at any level are not new… Corruption is an institution" (TELES, Guilherme, "Catilinárias, Eduardo Cunha e a Roma Antiga: A República e seus suspiros!" ("Catilines, Eduardo Cunha and Ancient Rome: The Republic and its last breath!", in: Jusbrasil, December 15, 2015, available at <https://guilhermetelesadv.jusbrasil.com.br/artigos/267571612/catilinarias-eduardo-cunha-e-a-roma-antiga> accessed September 15, 2019.

The origin of the word imaginary comes from the Latin *imaginari* which means "to form a mental picture of something". *Imaginari* in its turn derives from *imago*, "image, representation", which has the same root as *imitari*, in other words, "copy, make alike". From this same root comes another word frequently used today: "imagination". This leads us to conclude that the word imaginary and its different uses are associated also to image and imagination.[6]

With such dispersed but at the same time rich meanings, the term imaginary underwent several appropriations. However, between the 19th and 20th centuries, it became the conceptual tool of different areas of study, from Philosophy to Epistemology (Gaston Bachelard, Michel Mafesolli, Edgar Morin), Psychoanalysis (Freud, Jung) to Anthropology (Gilbert Durand) and History (George Dumézil, George Duby, Jacques LeGoff).

However, if an unequivocal definition for the term imaginary for academic use is far from finding a solution due to a lack of agreement among researchers, it is possible to classify its use in two broad groups. On the one hand, there is a perspective connected to Psychoanalysis and Anthropology that sees the imaginary as the object of universal, timeless, human unconscious, formed by the connections between senses built throughout the ages and stemming from the relationship between man, his bodily functions (nourishment, copulation, etc.) and natural elements (materials). History is simply a concrete form of materialization of these dispositions and should be studied in order to understand the structuring and signifying plethora of the imaginary. It is in this direction that one can find the studies of Gaston Bachelard, Gilbert Durand and Carl Jung. On the other hand, we have a historical-social view according to which the imaginary is fundamentally the object of the culture of human societies. Although one can speak of the unconscious or pre-conscious elements of the imaginary, it is formed by historical human action in time and in specific locations. Understanding the imaginary can only occur based on a contextualized interpretation, through a series of phenomena found in a common social-economical structure. This is the main reason the term imaginary will often be accompanied by the adjective "social". It is in this direction that the studies in the area of History upheld by authors such as Auguet & Cazenave (1995), Baczko (1985) and Girardet (1987) can be found. Though these researchers accept that the social imaginary is present in myths and popular culture (folklore), the essential forms of its renewal in contemporary societies is found in fiction, such as in cinema and literature, due to the capacity these genres have of composing challenging narratives that bring life

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[6] In relation to the Latin terms, see reference works: Cledat (1924), Ernout (1945) and Gaffiot (1936).

to the deepest elements of the imaginary, while also adding new elements derived from the social-cultural context in which they are produced.

In the specific case of Rome, we follow the general assumption that the appropriation of topics belonging to its politics by contemporary culture – especially by literary and cinematographic works, and even games – has contributed to the construction/consolidation of a *political imaginary* associated to the "decadence" of Western society through topics such as "corruption", "personal ambition", "manipulation", etc., as demonstrated by Santo Mazzarino (1991). We also follow the specific assumption, that will be tested by the current research, that these "topics" of Roman politics are present in the interpretation of Brazilian politics today based on the construction/update of what we here call "the imaginary of political decadence."

Decadence: myth and narrative of an endless fall

The Republic and, notably, the Roman Empire are two of the historical periods that most render themes to illustrate theses and interpretations related to aspects of human history, whether from a political, economic or, especially, moral point of view. This tradition begins in Ancient Times themselves, as exemplified by Polybius, Sallust, Titus Livius and, notably, Cicero whose famous expression *historia magistra vitea* referred mainly to the past of Roman institutions as a profusion of lessons regarding the best form of government.[7] Interest in the theme continued in the works of medieval philosophers and theologians concerned about the "fall of Rome", but was revitalized during the Renaissance and Enlightenment when the main thinkers of these periods went looking to the Romans for examples for their political treatises and philosophies of History. Hence, it is no wonder that Machiavelli, whose work *The Prince* presents many cases taken from Roman history, goes to Titus Livius for inspiration for another founding text of his political theory: *Discourses on the First Ten of Titus Livy*. It is also no cause for surprise that an author such as Charles-Louis de Secondat, better known as the Baron of Montesquieu, is inspired by Polybius when he develops his theory on the

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[7] "But History, the witness of the times, the light of truth, the life of memory, the teacher of life, the messenger of antiquity, by which voice is it entrusted to immortality, if not the orator's?" [*Historia vero testis temporum, lux Veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis, qua você alia nisi oratoris immortalitati commendatur*]?". De oratore, II, 9, 36).

three powers in *The Spirit of Law,* and Rome is his main theme in one of his treatise (*Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline).*

The author that is best known for this form of analysis is undoubtedly the English writer Edward Gibbon and his monumental oeuvre *The History of the Decline of the Roman Empire*. However, contrary to what is expected, this text is not a mere reflection about the "fall" of Rome, but, above all, a defense of its cultural and moral virtues, whose apex occurred during the Age of Antonines (132-180 B.C.). The cause of the fall would have been the weakening of these qualities, especially in relation to the decreasing involvement of its citizens in the city's business, which happened as the Empire Christianized, among other factors. Lastly, we should also mention other referential works, such as Oswald Arnold Gottfried Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*.

It is not the scope of this article to develop a deep analysis on the theme "the fall of Rome", especially considering that this would be done not to reinforce the idea but to deconstruct concepts such as *crisis* and *fall*, following what is carried out by Henri-Iréné Marrou (1977). The aim is to forge a synthesis of the views on "the decline of Rome" so as to identify some constancy.

As Jacque Le Goff (1984) points out the word decadence does not exist in Roman Latin. The expression we use today is derived from the word *decadentia* from Medieval Latin and its origin remains uncertain and use debatable. However, as Marcello Paniz Giacomoni and even Le Goff evince, the idea of decadence can be seen in embryonic form in Greek words such as *phthorá* (ruin) and Latin words such as *inclinata* (decline), *exhauriatur* (exhaust, corrupt) and *labente* (fall, decrease). Moreover, Giacomoni (2011: 68-69) calls attention to the formula *inclinata res publica* (decline of the State) found in Cicero and Sallust. Another important point mentioned by these authors is that the idea of decadence does not form a concept in itself. In reality, one could say that it is a relatively pervasive "image" whose causes and consequences are varied. Therefore, it is not illogical to think of its connection to the imaginary.

Of the many concepts of decadence – which is not our aim to go through here comprehensively – there are two that must be emphasized: on the one hand, that the world would be going through a process of constant degradation that would inevitably lead to a road of no return, or to the end of a cycle that inevitably would mean its ruin, even if there were future recovery; on the other hand, the process of degradation is viewed through an idealization of the past when compared to the present, albeit with the possibility of a halt or an about-face in the process through corrective actions in the present. As Le Goff, and especially Santo Mazzarino

(1991), point out, the first case does not belong to the Ancient world per se, since there was no idea of a total annihilation of the world necessarily, though it was conceived in terms of corruption and fall.

Lastly, a distinction among visions of "decadence" must be brought up. One of these focuses on an explanation for the cyclical Roman Fall based on a organistic view of human societies in which the "decline" of Rome would be a natural process, since all empires and/or civilizations would go through birth, growth, apogee and finally death. Proponents of this view include Toynbee and Spengler. Another perspective attempts to explain "the fall of Rome" in itself, as is the case of Gibbon. Here we have, on the one hand, external reasons that say Rome gradually degraded due to the influence of other populations, whether in military attacks or because of the negative effect brought on by contact with new and foreign civilizations, especially the "Barbarians" and "Orientals". On the other hand, there was internal degradation to which external influence may have contributed, though not in a definite way.

The research – methods and methodologies

Researching contemporary topics while using internet posts as a source is not exactly an easy task, free of doubts and constant revision. The sheer volume in postings, their traffic and volatility, as well as diversity, can daunt a researcher and, thus, demands considerable methodological challenges. One of the problems, admittedly, is to consider the huge disparity in the material found online and, notably, the lack of "intellectual background", in which generally questionable information and opinions are set forth. In many cases, to make matters worse, these are deliberately fake, spun by "authors" who take advantage of their "temporary anonymity", allowed by the creation of "fake profiles". All this, besides affecting the genuineness of the research, can provoke contempt on the part of the investigators who wish to study "more serious" topics. Nevertheless, in the case of the object of my interest, these are the very characteristics that make these sources so interesting since they allow varied and scattered discourses which would remain publicly silent in any other situation. In other words, I am not interested in finding "authorized" discourses on the subject of "the decadence of Rome" exactly. I am focused on having access – even if limited and provisional – to representations that are disseminated in different social spaces. In this case, the internet is a wellspring of evidence.

In order to carry out this task, we have divided our research in three stages. The first consists of mapping internet posts on pages, blogs, sites and profiles on social media in which there were attempts to connect themes such as "Ancient Rome" and "Brazil today". A previous question was to define the terms that are the basis for an initial scan. For the purposes of the material presented here, the terms chosen were *Rome + Ancient + Brazil + today*, opting for simple words without the use of quotation marks to allow as broad a research as possible. Besides that, I chose to browse "incognito mode" to avoid the interference of my profile as a researcher of Ancient Times in the selection of material collected by *Google*.[8]

However, the initial results of the scanning corresponded to 22 million 400 thousand items according to the research site. Therefore, a new filtering process was needed for the sample. To do that, a technical study regarding the criteria used by Google algorithms was carried out at the time of the research (May and June 2019) in order to select and place the posts in a hierarchical order in the browser's system.[9]

After this study, two blocks of criteria for classification of posts determining its level of visibility on the search system were identified:

A) In relation to the technology used by the site/page researched, especially regarding the internal "structure" of the site, which makes user browsing easier:

A1) responsiveness, i.e., sites that adapt to mobiles such as cell phones and tablets;

A2) browsing ease and speed when loading pages;

A3) coherent structure of menu: didactic, easy to understand;

A4) all pages (tabs) should include the keyword;

A5) user friendly, clear program.

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[8] Google was chosen as a browser for my research instead of other options due to the fact that 90% of searches on the internet in Brazil were done with this browser. See: PATEL, Nei. *Sites de Busca: Conheça os 10 Buscadores Mais Usados no Mundo (Search Engines: the 10 Most Used Browsers in the World)*, available at <https://neilpatel.com/br/blog/sites-de-busca/>, accessed December 2, 2019.

[9] At the time of the research, the algorithm used by Google was March 2019 Core Update. The criteria for previous algorithms was also used for analysis to observe the greatest constancy of patterns among systems, such as Panda, Penguin, Hummingbird, Mobile, etc. The sources of consultation for this research were Neil Patel (https://neilpatel.com/br/), Semrush (https://pt.semrush.com/blog/) Rock Content (https://rockcontent.com/), Search Engine Land (https://searchengineland.com/),
Resultados Digitais (Digital Results) (https://resultadosdigitais.com.br/blog/) and Google Central for Webmasters (https://webmasters.googleblog.com/).

B) In relation to the content of the site with reference to the terms used in the search, the algorithm favored:

B1) texts that included the keywords, i.e., the most typed in terms in the research;

B2) texts that are not copies of others. Copies are those that include the same paragraphs with more than 4 lines. When the copy is identified, older posts are preferred since the probably contain the original text;

B3) pages with a larger amount of accesses until the time of the research, i.e., a cycle of growth is established since access leads to visibility and visibility leads to greater access;

B4) contents that refer to external links with credibility recognized by system criteria: number of accesses, sites cited by others, etc.;

B5) last, accessibility.

Based on this study, several relevant conclusions for our research can be reached to guide our choice of meaningful material. First, considering the technical criteria of hierarchization, the Google algorithms tend to favor sites/pages with a more elaborate browsing structure, giving more visibility to professional platforms in comparison to the "amateur" or personal ones. Second, considering the issue of content, the system will favor posts that are more coherent with the terms of the search, present more originality and, especially, present greater visibility measured by the previous access of users. Thus, one can say that the hierarchization of posts by Google in a research by words favors a more professional material and, therefore, offers an unequal access to "public discourse" for different interlocutors that want publicity or their ideas on the internet. At the same time, this study also allows us to say that the posts favored by Google in their order of appearance present a reasonable degree of representation regarding what is most seen and read when it prioritizes the most original texts and those most accessed by users. Furthermore, the search page of this browser offers additional information, such as the session "people also ask", showing other questions users have in relation to the topic investigated. In our case, interesting questions came up, such as "What are the differences between the Ancient Roman Republic and the form of government in Brazil today?" which shows that other users had also been curious about our object of inquiry.

Lastly, after considering these questions, our initial research limited itself to the first 50 publications listed by Google in the survey carried out May 20, 2019. These are now under analysis. Previously, we had adopted the criteria of discarding pages coming up as "advertisement", but these did not appear in our sample.

This takes us to the second stage of our investigation. We then classified the posts according to the following characteristics whenever there was available information: **a) who speaks** – based on the author's identification in the post as to profession, position as interlocutor (text author, collaborator, commentator, etc.), age group and sex/gender; **b) from where he/she speaks** – if the post is in a blog, on a site or social media; if the post space is "professional" or "amateur/personal", if it is collective or individual and, finally, if it is connected to a specific area of knowledge and which one that was; **c) to whom the speech is addressed** – which public is the preferred target of the material (general public, students, specialized professionals, etc.); **d) what is said** about the subject.

Finally, the third stage is the categorization and unitarization of the documental corpus in order to find the main relations of meaning established in the texts: themes, figures, causality, analogy, etc. This is the phase the research is at now.

Some temporary results: Rome, a lesson to be followed or example to be avoided

Considering the data analysis phase of this research is still underway, we do not have definitive results regarding the theme dealt with here. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this article, we can present some initial thoughts based on the study of the 10 first cases listed by Google in our original investigation. The characteristics were organized in the table below.

MAP OF DISCOURSE ABOUT: *ROME + ANCIENT + BRAZIL + TODAY* Date of the initial survey: 05/31/19															
PROFESSION	**EDUCATION**	**Q***	**WHO SPEAKS**				**P***	**A***	**AGE GROUP**						**WHAT IS SAID?**
			education	Online paper	Acad. Journal	Personal Blog			<14	15 Y 20	21 Y 30	31 Y 40	41 Y 50	>51	
Students, Elementary and High School	Elementary and High School	4	4				3	1		4					**Bread and circuses;** manipulation; **social assistance;** Social differences

															Themes
Lawyers/Law	Law School	2		1	1		2	0				1		1	Unemployment; b**read and circuses**; unemployment; manipulation, coup d'Etat;
History Professors	History	2	2				1	1		1			1		Oratory; law; mythology; legislative; política representation; conspiraçy
Ecclesiastical	Theology	1				1	0	1						1	decadence, passive masses, b**read and circuses**, moral crisis, **social assistance**;
Businessman/Essayist	Social Sciences	1		1			1	0						1	decadence, passive masses, b**read and circuses**, moral crisis, **social assistance**;
TOTAL		10	6	2	1	1	7	3		4	1	1	1	3	

Q*: quantity of posts.
P*: page/site considered professional, with institutional name, periodical posts, with sponsors.
A*: page/site considered amateur/personal, no institutional name, no known periodicity and no sponsors.

There are some inferences that can be drawn in relation to the data organized above, and though these are temporary and subject to confirmations and revisions after more extensive investigations have occurred, they seem very meaningful. The first is regarding the prevalence of the area of History teaching in posts, where we found 4 authors identified as Elementary or High School students and two History teachers, totaling the majority of the sample. It also called our attention that 7 of the 10 sites that were studied were classified as "professional" – 4 of these were linked to Education, such as the site *Branly*[10], with two posts, *EscolaKids*[11] and *Ensinar História*[12]. Lastly, when the themes in the publications were observed we could find expressions such as *Bread and circuses, manipulation, social assistance, social differences* in the speech of the students. In the speech of the teachers we found more "neutral" subjects such as *oratory, law, mythology, legislative, political representation* and *conspiracy*. In other words, there seems to be greater "politicizing" of the themes discussed in the speech of the students when compared to that of the teachers, who prefer to limit themselves to traditional school content. When we moved to other areas, the themes politicize a great deal, and terms such as *Bread and circuses, manipulation, coup d'Etat, decadence, moral crisis, social assistance* and *passive masses* were predominant, regardless of the profession and/or education of the interlocutor. Finally, regarding the age group of the authors, it is interesting to notice that the posts were divided into two

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[10] https://brainly.com.br/, accessed May 29, 2019.
[11] https://escolakids.uol.com.br/, accessed May 29, 2019.
[12] https://ensinarhistoriajoelza.com.br/, accessed May 29, 2019.

extremes: 4 for the group between 15 and 20 years old and 3 for the group over 50, while the other three spread out in the remaining intervals.

After this general analysis, we will now consider some details of specific cases. We will begin with the May 2016 post of one of the groups of students; the students wrote essays about the theme "History – Ancient Rome x Brazil today: Critical Analysis of Public and Political Life in Ancient Rome and Brazil today"[13] and on a site of shared content. In this publication, we read:

> Romans used bread and circuses to entertain and comfort slaves and the poor. Today, **soccer has the same role in Brazil**. It leads people to focus on soccer way too much and too little on what really matters. **Brazilians are the third most ignorant people about themselves**, ahead only of Mexico and India in this feature. (*Education: Questions and Answers* – High School student).

In another text, this is what can be read:

> When we consider Roman politics and compare [Brazilian and Roman politics] they are very alike. **Roman politics is very similar to that found in Brazil since the people here in Brazil who work for politicians also do hard labor and other work** which was adapted **for Roman slaves**. The place the slave occupied within this society was quite extensive, he was considered part of the family. This did not exempt him from the violence and exploitation of his owners. […] **In Brazil, workers also occupy a place in society more in this place and** [sic] **it is mostly ignored** by many people, including their employers. **In Brazil, there is female work as in Rome**, women are called maids [sic] they work in the homes of people who might consider them part of the family, though they cannot forget they are maids [sic] who must do their work and not mix things up in the relationship between employees and employers. **Another very political act in Rome was legitimate marriage**, in which the main purpose of marriage was political, an aristocrat would marry the daughter of another aristocrat in order to maintain hierarchy within both families and in society. **This kind of marriage is still found in Brazil among people of higher social levels**, even if among few people. (*Education: Questions and Answers* – High School student).

Here we find two different forms of approaching the comparison between Ancient Rome and Brazil today: the first shows us a "functional" association between the expression "bread and circuses" and the importance given to "soccer" in Brazil. It is a critical observation of Roman and Brazilian societies, which are likened by the traditional issue of "political manipulation", including very negative opinions in relation to the supposed "ignorance of the Brazilian people about themselves", which is mentioned as one of the conditions that facilitates its "manipulation". The other post is very different and more detailed in its truly creative effort to find

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[13] Available at http://soldaliberdade1ano.blogspot.com/2014/05/historia-roma-antiga-x-brasil-atual.html, and accessed May 31, 2019.

various connections between Rome and Brazil today (work, women's conditions, marriage). However, it is notable how there is a search for connections through the theme "labor exploitation". The impression that there are similarities in this issue between an ancient society and a new one emerges, an indication of a lack of "evolution", especially regarding paid employment in Brazil and slave labor in Rome.

After having taken a look at what students think, we will now evaluate three articles published in online journals and blogs. The first was posted in the newsletter *Minuto do Nordeste*, May 2015, with the long title "Ancient Rome and Brazil Today: A Politics of Individual Powers? *The political scenario in Brazil is in ruins, for there is always a great deal of fire before the smoke*." The author says the following about Rome:

> Brazilian Congress and the State Assemblies demonstrate that the **conspiracies and collusions of the Ancient Romans was child's play**, historical romps. And that **the drive for power and prestige is still the hunger they attempt to satiate**. The **people are a mere detail** […] They are **used and excreted every two years**, and with no respect at all for voters, they launch their **social assistance miracles** like machine guns and their mortal firing. […] How many Brutuses and how many Cesars are there in the political system in Brazil today? Without really knowing who they are, there is only one thing certain: that the people are **the only ones betrayed**, and because they are hugely **helpless, they live in the obscure silence of passivity**. (*Jornal Minuto do Nordeste*, article, businessman, Social Sciences graduate),[14]

Another article was posted April 2016 by a lawyer on the GGN site, a publication of the well-known journalist Luís Nassif,[15]. It deals with the topic of plea bargains associated to *Operation Car Wash* investigations, with the title "Plea Bargains" Brazil today x Ancient Rome". The author begins referring to a text by Nassif himself who criticizes the use of plea bargains in those investigations, stating that:

> […] I would like to go back to **some other experiences with plea bargains at this time**. **Conflicts in Rome were constant**. When there was abundance, the patricians fought to raise their privileges, or keep them, while the plebeians tried to acquire rights and political space. **With scarcity, the representatives of these two groups accused each other**, saying the other group was irresponsible for the crisis.

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[14] Available at http://www.minutonordeste.com.br/noticia/roma-antiga-e-o-brasil-atual-uma-politica-de-poderes-individuais/223, accessed 05/20/19.
[15] Available at https://jornalggn.com.br/noticia/delacoes-premiadas-brasil-atual-x-roma-antiga/, accessed 05/22/19

After these initial considerations, the writer mentions the cases of two different Roman leaders: Spurius Maelius, who apparently attempted a coup at the beginning of the Roman Republic, which was disclosed and duly controlled; and Camillus[16], unjustly accused by Manlius Capitolinus of having taken the Roman treasury which had been given as ransom to the Gauls when they looted Rome in 390 BC. Camillus was acquitted of this crime and Manlius arrested for the false accusation. Going back to Brazilian politics, the author states

> **To save themselves from the crimes they had committed, some whistleblowers broaden the anti-PT movement** daily, spread by *tucanos* and journalists who were unhappy with the victory of Dilma Rousseff. Some informants have become the heroes of journalistic and detective soap operas. […]

> **Brazil has been called the last flower of Latium.** Therefore, it is **impossible not to ask, what Roman Republic do we want for Brazil? The one that never was** (in which Spurius Maelius and Manlius Capitolinus got what they wished for) or the one that **actually flourished** (after protecting the hero Camillus)? (GNC, article, lawyer).

The two examples above are similar and different at the same time. In the first, a direct connection between Roman politics and Brazilian politics today is made, though disfavoring our situation. Ancient Rome and Brazil would have "conspiracies" and "collusions", the drive for power and a passive people kept in the dark in common. However, with this comparison, the author tries to use the Roman example as a negative parameter of political life, and not exactly praise the Ancient world, showing that, in Brazil, the situation is even worse. In the second example, however, there is a different position: if, in the beginning, there is a disapproval of a supposed Roman practice of denouncing adversaries as a political weapon – which the author associates, interestingly, to the "plea bargains" used in *Operation Car Wash* – the case of Rome is not mentioned in a negative way, since it offers a positive alternative to deal with this problem. In other words, the appeal to Roman history is made to offer the right example of how to deal with the political use of "public denunciations" against "national heroes", looking for common ground between the "plea bargains" and the accusations of Manlius against Camillus, though the author did not go as far as directly connecting the Roman Tribune with the Brazilian president at the time.

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[16] Marcus Furius Camillus, political and military leader of the beginning of the Roman Republic was consular leader and dictator.

The last post that will be analyzed is different from the others. The author of the text, contrary to the ones before, was a publicly known personality with a strong political activism on social media and television programs: the Catholic priest Paulo Ricardo de Azevedo Júnior, who owns a blog with his own name (pepauloricardo.org) and is openly a follower of the conservative ideas of Olavo de Carvalho.[17] In an article published December 2013, in other words, during the second half of President Dilma Rousseff's first term, Father Paulo finds references to criticize the Brazilian situation at the time in Ancient Rome. The long title of the text is in itself a clue of the type of approach the priest has in mind: "**Today as in Rome**: It is impossible not to connect the **moral decadence of the Roman Empire with the frailty of customs exhorted by modernity**." Right at the beginning of the text, the priest indicates the use he will give to history, i.e., as a profusion of lesson about the present:

> Looking at **some more distant chapters of history can be an opportunity for great knowledge: the lesson of the heroes** and of giants of **other eras can show us the path to take** while, on the other hand, **the ancient vulnerabilities and errors advise modern man what is the path to avoid**.

As a consequence of this point of view, soon after, the author informs us that, in his opinion, the "history of Ancient Rome has memorable pages", but,

> at the same time, however, it is impossible not to compare the narrative of some **decadent customs in the Roman Empire to the moral vulnerability of our days**. At the same time Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Palestine, the surrounding environment was run over by of

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[17] According to his channel on YouTube, Father Paulo Ricardo is currently a priest at the Archdiocese of Cuiaba, MT (https://www.youtube.com/user/padrepauloricardo/about) and owner of the blog with his name: https://padrepauloricardo.org/ . The influence of Olavo de Carvalho's ideas on his way of thinking is informed by the priest himself in an introductory video that he recorded to enthusiastically comment Carvalho's book "O mínimo que você precisa saber para não ser um idiota" (What you minimally need to know not to be an idiot): Father Paulo Ricardo's intellectual work was deeply influenced by Olavo de Carvalho. As a faithful priest of Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church, Father Paulo could not understand why there were so many obstacles within and outside the Church in transmitting the Catholic faith and morals. After 2002, when he came into contact with Professor Olavo, he began to understand the reason. From this productive encounter with Olavo, the well-known course: Revolution and Cultural Marxism" was created."(A*o Vivo com Pe. Paulo (Live with Father Paulo)*, September 11, 2013, available at https://padrepauloricardo.org/episodios/o-minimo-que-voce-precisa-saber-para-nao-ser-um-idiota and accessed August 5, 2019).

the most horrendous evil, practices which, unfortunately, contemporary man has stooped to copy, **throwing civilization into new – and more devastating – ruin.**

After this initial warning, Father Paulo begins to list what, to him, would be the most important examples of these similarities between Rome and the world today:

> And the **similarities are not few**. To start, we have the excessive intervention of **the State in the life of individuals**. The French historian Daniel-Ropos evaluates: "In all eras and countries, the replacement of the natural tendencies of man with the will of the State is **always a sign of decadence**. A nation is very ill when, in order to live honestly and have children, it needs prizes and rules." **In Rome, "a popular mass in a varied state of idleness**, made up of uprooted peasants, independent workers now lacking jobs, freed slaves and cosmopolitan foreigners" formed fertile ground for **state parasitism**. […]

After these quotations by the French writer and History professor Henri Petiot (whose literary pseudonym was Daniel-Ropos) about a supposed relation between State interventionism and the decadence of civilization, with a direct reference to Rome, Father Paulo turns back to the Brazilian case:

> Many of our **fellow Brazilians have replaced free initiative**, their own dreams and projects, to live **at the expense of the State**, reaping benefits without undergoing the heavy burden of labor; **they have chosen the mediocre politics of** *panem et circenses* **instead of the daily toil** with the family, whether it be work or studies – a life of sacrifices, yes, but of much greater and nobler moral value.

Though the priest's article establishes other connections between the "decadence" of the Ancient world and modern moral "decadence" – such as the demographic decline in the Roman world, similar to the drop in fertility that he identifies today -, for our purposes, the quotations above are enough. What do find in them? Once again, there is the perception of History as *exempla*, i.e., as a source of knowledge on what do and not to do in society today, though now he is clearer. We also identify references to the politics of "bread and circuses" as something associated to the population's passivity and apathy. Nevertheless, I can identify two difference that are worth emphasizing. The first is in the introduction, where the theme of "Roman decadence" associated to "contemporary decadence" is made in an eloquent and even dramatic way. This had not appeared as clearly in previous posts, though what they have in common is the belief that the case today is even worse than the one in the past. The second difference lies in the connection of this

moral decadence – and the population's coexistent passivity – with "State interventionism", which would lead to "State parasitism", i.e., the tendency of the people to prefer replacing "free initiative" with "living at the expense of the State." This is undoubtedly an uncommon interpretation regarding the negative effects of a "bread and circuses politics" revamped for our times, which normally is seen as the result of "social assistance" or a deviation of public of power and not as the typical terms used in the ideas of economical liberalism.

Closing Remarks

Although this research has made a great deal of headway in several points, we still have more questions than answers themselves regarding the topic under investigation. Nevertheless, in the initial analysis presented above, some findings can be observed. The first is the unmistakable presence of the kind of approach we identified from the beginning, in other words, the use of History – and especially Roman History – as a treasure of examples that can guide actions today, even if to indicate what should not be repeated. In other words, the excessive use of the "intuitive method" to look for an explanation for Brazil's reality today through analogies with the past. Furthermore, the idea that the search for these "examples" is mostly negative is reinforced: Ancient Rome, in general, is seen as a locus of corruption, unrestrained ambition and moral decadence. Though it is not dealt with in a very straightforward way, the topic of *Roman decadence* itself (the term hardly comes up in posts) seems to be an underlying idea in most of the arguments, notably when Rome is used in comparisons with what should not be done. In any case, an issue that called our attention – appearing in two of the samples given – was the idea that the world today not only repeats the mistakes of the Ancient world but strengthens and enhances them, contributing to an even more dramatic level of "moral fall". All of this leads us to believe there is the strong presence of a political imaginary of a "Rome of corruption and decadence" in the majority of the posts, though there are still insufficient elements to map the path of these perceptions until they reached the speech found in the research.

There are still insufficient elements to state if there are differences in the argumentative appropriation of the Roman world between speakers leaning more to the left or to the right of the national political field. From the small sample analyzed, the more drastic and decadent views on Rome appear more intensely in posts identified with authors connected to conservative thinking, while the text leaning more to leftist politics presented a less negative vision of Rome. However,

due to the initial stage and reduced size of the empirical base of the research, more precise conclusions cannot be reached.

Finally, two observations concern me the most. On the one hand, the strong perception of a "bread and circuses politics" connected to the manipulation of "the people" by those in power and to the "passivity of the masses", ideas that have been spread concerning the Roman "plebs" but that has been disputed by specialized literature.[18] However, we notice an insistence in the circulation of this conservative and biased perception regarding the "Roman people" and by extension the "Brazilian people". On the other hand, the fact that this biased view permeates both posts dealing with political debate as well as those related to the teaching of History should serve as an alert to specialists in Ancient History regarding the public domain of their area of expertise.

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[18] See for example, Renata Garraffoni (2005).

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