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Brazil, Amazon, World: Toxic Masculinity

What does homophobia and sociopathic (worse than “toxic”) masculinity have to do with savanna and pandemics? A lot. And, in Brazil, the relationship is stark and alarming. Savanna is what the Amazon rainforest is about to become because, if it hasn’t yet reached tipping point, it will quite soon, perhaps as early as 2039: 14.2% of the rainforest has already been lost and scientists calculate that a loss of 20-25% will set off an irreversible transition to savanna. President Jair Messias Bolsonaro (“Not one centimetre will be demarcated for indigenous reserves”) is doing his best to accelerate the process. So far, he has sabotaged environmental law enforcement, falsely accused NGOs of burning the rainforest, and undermined Indigenous rights to the point of crimes against humanity by egging on land grabbers to use violence against the rainforest peoples and, now, his latest attempt is to push through legislation granting ownership rights to property that was illegally invaded and cleared before 2014.

This isn’t only about loss of an extraordinary territory, home to more than three million species and some 10% of the world’s biodiversity. Bolsonaro and men like him are also driving the probability of a whole new array of zoonotic pandemics that are linked with habitat fragmentation, deforestation, biodiversity loss, intensive agriculture, livestock farming, land grabbing, and pollution, all of which feature high on Bolsonaro’s get-done list. Shortly before he was elected, the Spanish daily *El Pais* described him as “a former captain in the Army’s paratrooper brigade, lover of military government, torture, police executions; macho, racist, and profoundly ignorant about any matter that doesn’t entail testosterone displays”. The title explains why a country would want to be led by this “thing”, as he is called by many Brazilians who can’t bear to pronounce his name: “The

Elite Prefers an Alpha Macho”. This brings us to the part about homophobia and sociopathic masculinity. As for the elite, more than Bolsonaro, they actually prefer his ultraliberal economic guru, Paolo Guedes. Anyway, elites have never been expected to like the goons they employ to do their dirty work.

Whatever their testosterone levels, alpha machos still have to find a way of justifying their behavior and comments (for example, “human rights are bullshit”) which are still thought indecorous in at least some government circles. One of the more effective ways to ensure that this vile virility is venerated is to enlist the help of religious zealots, in Brazil’s case, the evangelicals who occupy many first- and second-level positions in government, mainly in the areas of education, culture, human rights, and foreign policy (forging alliances with Israel, the Trump Administration, Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, the Law and Justice Party in Poland, etc.) thus getting international support as well as providing the sanctified extremist discourse the thuggish president needs.

These fundamentalists are very powerful, with a flock of more than 60 million out of a population of about 2,011 million. Even under Lula’s government, and then Rousseff’s, they achieved serious human rights setbacks, including cancellation of the anti-homophobia kit, undermining anti-AIDS policy and, to make a parody of obscenity, they got pastor Marco Feliciano (“Africans are descendants from ancestors cursed by Noah”) appointed as president of the Commission of Human Rights and Minorities Commission. With comments like pastor Feliciano’s, it’s not surprising that followers of Afro-Brazilian religions are increasingly being attacked by “soldiers of Jesus”, armed evangelical gangs with support from drug traffickers who, once converted, expel non-believers from their patches.

Then, there’s the fake news part, which isn’t just telling lies, but also a certain use of language. Protecting the Fatherland’s Amazon (extractive businesses) means feminizing and thus dismissing protectors of Mother Earth. A perfect symbol of this notion that planet defenders aren’t “men” but “girls” and “climate bedwetters” is Greta Thunberg. After her rousing speech at the 2019 UN Climate Summit, the wealthy celebrity journalist Ernesto Lacombe not only launched an attack on Thunberg but drove home the capitalist ideology that everything (including the Amazon, the world, and a teenager) has a price tag: “I don’t buy this girl ... I don’t buy this girl. I think that this girl has an alarmist speech, with phrases of effect”. The “girl” is too young to opine on men’s matters. As if this wasn’t enough, a dose of anti-Semitism (cozying up to Israel in the international ultra-right club is another, compartmentalized, matter) was thrown in: the “girl” was manipulated by

Orbán's enemy, the Jew George Soros. Another Bolsonaro mouthpiece, Gustavo Negreiro, dismissed her with the standard she's a "hysteric" and offered the also standard remedy. She needs "a man". Of course, this didn't only happen in Brazil. To give just one example of the tone, Trump staffer and EPA official Steve Milloy weighed in with his testosterone-fueled take, now roping in Putin: "She's ignorant, maniacal and is being mercilessly manipulated by adult climate bedwetters funded by Putin".

Lacombe, Negreiro, and Milloy join a long list of white men who are parading their masculinity problems on the stage of climate catastrophe. A growing field of research is drawing attention to the close links between denialists and gender reactionaries. For example, in 2014, Jonas Anshelm and Martin Hultman published an article titled "A Green Fatwā: Climate Change as a Threat to the Masculinity of Industrial Modernity" in which they analyze the language of "climate sceptics" who believe that what is being threatened isn't so much (Mother) nature as a "certain kind of modern industrial society constructed and dominated by its form of masculinity". Other studies are drawing attention to the toxic mix of climate denialism, racism, and misogyny in authoritarian movements of the "developed" world, and also the role of fossil fuels in normalizing the ravishing of Mother Earth to shore up patriarchal privileges in the fatherlands. In this sense, fossil fuels and the often phallic and fortress-military-style equipment used to extract them, help to (keep) erect the male identity needed for imposing the authoritarian rule needed to protect privilege as the world melts and burns. As Cara Daggett points out, "fossil fuels also secure cultural meaning and political subjectivities". Greed, along with misogyny, homophobia, and violent domination, is an essential trait of sociopathic masculinity. So, billionaires and big corporations will use every dirty trick in the playbook to get their hands on the trillions of dollars gestating in the Earth's womb, no matter who or what gets destroyed in the process.

When things get extreme, they can also become absurd. Jeff Bezos, having marveled at the pretty fragility of Mother Earth from outer space, wants to "save" her by sending industrial pollution to the sidereal realms he briefly visited in his Blue Origin rocket. Not lost on many commentators was the fact that said rocket looks like an erect (much more so than the fairly floppy organ than appeared in the hacked pics) penis. Hegemonic masculinity is becoming even more bizarre as the political and economic elite is dumbing down and the plight of the planet is ever more visibly worsening. The 1950 Frankfurt School publication *The Authoritarian Personality* (by Theodor Adorno et al.) stresses that more authoritarian men show "deep-seated fears of weakness", of their own insufficient

maleness, so their defenses take the form of pseudo-masculinity expressed as bragging, toughness (those outlandish he-man photos of Putin), and bombast underpinned by sadomasochistic (masochistic because of self-hating fear of impotence) destructiveness. The lust for power, as Erich Fromm argues in *Escape from Freedom*, comes not from strength, but weakness which tries to “gain secondary strength where genuine strength is lacking”. So, let’s attack a teenage “hysteric”. And while we’re about it, let’s show how invincibly powerful we are by destroying the planet itself.

In their project, these weak, authoritarian (mainly white heterosexual) men are threatened both by the gender equality and equity demanded by feminism and the LGBTQI+ movement, and by climate activism’s critique of the capitalist mode of production, which has always required fossil fuels and male domination. Of course, cause and effect aren’t quite so simple, but the links between hypermasculinity, sadism, dogmatism, cruelty, racism, homophobia, and attacks on Mother Earth are certainly suggestive in the extreme situation of Brazil where the Amazon rainforest represents one of the direst symptoms of the terrible state of the planet. The Bolsonaro government’s version of far-right nationalism (the Amazon is ours to do what we want with it, a mentality not far from that of some Spanish wife killers: *La maté porque era mía* [I killed her because she was mine]) is one of the most sinister, both in terms of what’s happening in Brazil and what it can mean for the world, especially as the country’s (weak) macho leader depends on support from extremely violent paramilitary organizations and fundamentalist churches that don’t shrink from criminal activities as they head for their Armageddon.

These issues are coming together in some feminist studies where women are working in overlapping areas like mobilization of anti-genderism in climate denialism; how anti-feminist, racist, and anti-Indigenous movements combine and reinforce each other; white supremacist gender ideologies; climate denialism and conspiracy theories; sociopathic masculinities; fake news, digital hate; and gender and environment in evangelist dogma and environmental apocalypticism. All these focuses are relevant to Brazil, and any government that replaces the Bolsonaro regime will have to confront them and see the interconnections between them if it wants to bring about real change. Talking about the problems in terms of the patriarchy or environmentalism alone isn’t enough. The more embracing term “kyriarchy”—from the Greek *kyrios* (lord or master) and *archion* (authority, domination, sovereignty)—would seem to be more helpful.

Recently revived by the Kurdish-Iranian refugee, Behrouz Boochani in his book *No Friend but the Mountains*, “kyriarchy” was coined in 1992 by feminist theologian

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Boochani used the term to denote the cruel international system that kept him illegally detained for six years in Australia's offshore prison camp on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, which was designed to break the spirit of every captive. Schüssler Fiorenza used it to cover all the interacting systems of domination and subordination in which an individual can be oppressed in some relationships and oppressive in others. The term kyriarchy fits neatly with intersectionality because it includes hierarchical systems that enforce and institutionalize the domination of a person or group by another, and covers sexism, racism, xenophobia, injustice, inequality, legal systems, homophobia, transphobia, ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism, colonialism, anti-environmentalism, and other systems that depend on each other to enforce their objectives. While "patriarchy" focuses on how traditional male authority subjugates women, "kyriarchy" opens up to scrutiny areas of elite domination or authority in many other conditions and stations of life, so a black woman manager might sack a white man, or a feminist might underpay and humiliate an immigrant woman cleaner.

The kyriarchy isn't a fixed hierarchy even if its components stack up to form a pyramid. And, evidently, people at the bottom of this complex, shifting system are the most crushed by all the different kinds of oppression. In this regard, the term has a strong potential for defending human rights since it doesn't defend any one right at the expense of others, doesn't opt for simple stereotypes when allotting blame, doesn't present a certain kind of violence as a fixed, encapsulated thing that can be excised like a cyst from an otherwise robust body, and makes the uncomfortable point that a victim can also be an abuser as well as drawing attention to the collaborators of the system. The term allows for shifts in types of oppressive power and discourages pigeonholing of social problems into categories like racism, sexism, militarism, cronyism, and so on. This is where it is more insightful and inclusive than "patriarchy" when one is trying to see how destructive hypermasculinity fits into a whole system.

If the system is to be dismantled, a logical first step would be to build a counter-hegemony and bring long-excluded people at the bottom of the pyramid—those who are informed by direct experience about exactly what noxious social practices must be changed—into the project. And this is where the fourth part of an effective interconnected public policy for Brazil's recovery comes in. In addition to trying to prevent the Amazon from becoming savanna, reinforcing human rights and especially LGBTQI+ rights in this hypermasculinized society, putting an end to fake news and especially murderous and apocalyptic evangelical propagandizing, instituting a universal basic income above the

poverty line would help to empower the poorest citizens and introduce a new ethos where they are no longer targets for armed gunmen but true citizens with a guaranteed civic existence. Nancy Fraser observes that, “Climate dissensus is fraught ... not ‘only’ because the fate of the Earth hangs in the balance, nor ‘only’ because time is short, but also because the *political climate*, too, is wracked by turbulence”. Hence, “the political sphere is now the site of a frantic search not just for better policies, but for new political projects and ways of living”. A universal (especially because no one should be excluded) basic income would clearly be one of the “better policies” because the battle isn’t “just” to save the Amazon, save the planet, but also a battle for a material base of existence that is essential for attaining the broad-based cultural and symbolic hegemony that might really change things.

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