

# Populism and New Theopolitical Formations in the Americas

Columbia University, April 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 2022



# Schedule

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## MONDAY, APRIL 11<sup>TH</sup>

### ANTHROPOLOGY LOUNGE, ROOM 465, SCHERMERHORN EXT.

- 9:15 – 9:30 AM      Introductory Remarks
- 9:30 – 10:30 AM    **Mareike Winchell, University of Chicago**  
*'Satan, be gone!': evangelicalism, indigeneity, and refusals of hybridity in post-coup Bolivia*  
Commentary: Maria José de Abreu
- 10:30 – 11:30 AM    **Luciana Chamorro Elizondo, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor**  
*Theopolitics and the economy of hate in post-revolutionary Nicaragua*  
Commentary: Carlota McAllister
- 11:30 – 11:40 AM    Coffee Break
- 11:40 – 12:40 PM    **Maria José de Abreu, Columbia University**  
*Sovereign incisions*  
Commentary: Joseph Russo
- 12:40 – 2:00 PM     Lunch
- 2:00 – 3:00 PM      **Bruno Reinhardt, Federal University of Santa Catarina**  
*The Katechon and the Messiah: time, history, and threat in Brazil's aspirational fascism*  
Commentary: Claudio Lomnitz

- 3:00 – 4:00 PM      **Claudio Lomnitz, Columbia University**  
*Andrés Manuel López Obrador's theory of history*  
Commentary: Valentina Napolitano
- 4:00 – 4:10 PM      Coffee Break
- 4:10 – 5:10 PM      **Valentina Napolitano, University of Toronto**  
*Immanent singularity and theopolitical charisma*  
Commentary: Luciana Chamorro Elizondo

## TUESDAY, APRIL 12<sup>TH</sup>

### ANTHROPOLOGY LOUNGE, ROOM 465, SCHERMERHORN EXT.

- 9:30 – 10:30 AM    **Joseph Russo, Purchase College, SUNY**  
*Hiding in Plain Sight: QAnon and its Seekers*  
Commentary: Letícia Cesarino
- 10:30 – 11:30 AM    **Letícia Cesarino, Federal University of Santa Catarina**  
*Do artifacts have theopolitics? Bolsonaroist resonances during the COVID-19 pandemic*  
Commentary: Mareike Winchell
- 11:30 – 11:40 AM    Coffee Break
- 11:40 – 12:40 PM    **Carlota McAllister, York University**  
*A house underground: anti-semitic conspiracy theories and the crisis of planetary sovereignty in Chilean Patagonia*  
Commentary: Bruno Reinhardt
- 12:40 – 2:00 PM     Lunch
- 2:00 – 3:00 PM      Concluding Remarks and Discussion

# Concept Note

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**THIS WORKSHOP** aims to establish a dialogue between the critical turn in religious and secular studies and debates around the rise of the radical populist right in the Americas. It explores comparatively new populist theopolitical formations in their relation to:

- a) sovereignty and soil,
- b) charisma and theatricality;
- c) neoliberalism and secular-religious assemblages.

**WHEREAS** the correlation between the continent's recent turn to the extreme right side of the political spectrum and changes in the religious field (growth of evangelical and Catholic charismatic Christianity) has been widely noticed, the nature of such cross-fertilization remains insufficiently theorized. Our purpose is to explore this theme through comparative inquiry on the shifting structures of religious and political authority in the region, including their theo-political entanglements. We assume that the concept of theopolitics (political theology "from below") can be a valuable resource to grasp why and how political authority is being newly infused with a theological dimension at a moment in which the liberal democratic social pact is going through a widespread legitimacy crisis. From a geopolitical inception of the Americas and an intra-disciplinary standpoint, we also argue that theopolitics allows for a better understanding of ongoing transformations of theological discourses and practices in the light of an incarnated politics.

This workshop is organized by **MARIA JOSÉ DE ABREU** (Columbia University), **VALENTINA NAPOLITANO** (University of Toronto), and **BRUNO REINHARDT** (Federal University of Santa Catarina) in partnership with the **INSTITUTE FOR RELIGION, CULTURE AND PUBLIC LIFE** at Columbia University.

It is cosponsored by the Critical Catholic Initiative at the University of Toronto.

# Abstracts

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## **“SATAN, BE GONE!”: EVANGELICALISM, INDIGENEITY, AND REFUSALS OF HYBRIDITY IN POST-COUP BOLIVIA”**

**Mareike Winchell (University of Chicago)**

In Bolivia, pro-Indigenous movements (inspired by Túpac Katari, or Katarismo) and 21st century evangelical Christian groups have converged in their refusals of cultural hybridity as a legitimate route of national futurity. Both movements, despite their obvious differences, challenge hybridity as a symptom of broader cultural debasements related to colonial religious and racial admixture and recent globalizing trends, including political liberalism. This paper considers the seeming parallels between Katarista branches of Indigenous organizing and conservative evangelicalism. While evangelical's role in President Evo Morales's ousting in the 2019 coup is by now largely familiar, scholars have yet to reckon with the ways that this new political development squares with older branches of Bolivian evangelicalism that were sympathetic, even deeply supportive, of rights-based projects of Indigenous justice. By counterposing two ethnographic moments in which evangelicals and Indigenous activists have commented upon the other by turning to the figure of hybridity, I argue that Bolivia's present offers a crucial point of insight into growing disaffections not only with *mestizaje* but also with liberal virtues of multicultural tolerance and humanistic relativism that reigned supreme throughout the late 20th century. At the same time, by drawing upon my fieldwork with Bolivian evangelicals a decade ago, I challenge accounts that cast the renewed emphasis upon cultural purity and civilizational superiority as inevitable or absolute.

## **THEOPOLITICS AND THE ECONOMY OF HATE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY NICARAGUA**

**Luciana Chamorro Elizondo (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)**

In April of 2018, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega was challen-

ged by anti-austerity protests that evolved into a nation-wide popular uprising. In response, First Lady and Vice President Rosario Murillo insisted that Nicaragua was being attacked by a “diabolical terrorist wave.” The Ortega regime organized public servants into “prayer groups against hate,” and armed police as well as a paramilitary army of Sandinista supporters with military caliber weapons to clear the streets, killing over three hundred and twenty-five people in the span of three months. Taking these events as the point of departure, this paper asks what made possible the transformation of Sandinismo into a kitsch, conservative political project invested in the mobilization of moralism and family values. Against the backdrop of neoliberalization and the transformations in the Nicaraguan religious field, I trace the Sandinista struggle to remake itself after the loss of teleological certainty afforded by the Sandinista Popular Revolution (1979-1990). Rather than understanding the Sandinista transformation as the mere instrumentalization of religion for political gain, I examine the theopolitics (McAllister and Napolitano 2020) of Sandinista efforts reinvigorate revolutionary passions in the contemporary moment by appealing to a transcendental struggle between the opposed forces of “love” and “hate.” I argue that this new aesthetic, affective and rhetorical economy promises to overcome Sandinista melancholia at the same time that it preserves the experience of moral righteousness once secured by the teleology of revolution. Ultimately, it replaces a “galvanizing moral vision” with a “reproachful moralizing sensibility.” (Brown 2001).

## **ANDRÉS MANUEL LÓPEZ OBRADOR’S THEORY OF HISTORY**

**Claudio Lomnitz (Columbia University)**

I feel hard-put to understand one of the premises and the expressed hope for this conference: the idea that Latin America has experienced a ‘swing to the Right’ hurdles us headlong into a highly contentious debate regarding what is right and what is left in contemporary Latin America. For my part, I do not find the Venezuelan, Cuban, Nicaraguan or Mexican governments of today aligning with my idea of what being ‘leftist’ is or should be, yet it is undeniable that, in those countries, ‘the Left’ is in power. As a result, I find the hope of exploring “viable alternatives for a repositioning of the left... beyond the continent’s expressive (ongoing) ‘swing to the Right’” complicated to address. In Mexico, at least, I no longer know what

'the left' is, if it is not the group that is in power. As a result, the politics of my intervention is not to 'reposition the left'; rather it turns on the hope of rescuing liberal democratic practices that I find to be a precondition for constitution of a political movement where justice, the common good, global interdependence, freedom and difference can be collectively addressed.

Based principally on his writings, my paper studies Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador's idea of history, with the aim of exploring how the national frame, and a particular notion of the historical dialectic, allows the president to divide the political field between friends and enemies in a way that subverts any recognizable idea of 'left' and 'right,' and that facilitates and fosters economic and political practices that operate and play on the fringes of the law. That space of play on the fringes of the law is created in a constant movement between the sovereign as a unique, exceptional, outsider and as the embodiment of 'the people' or, more precisely, 'the good people' (el pueblo bueno). As a result of this ambivalent placement of sovereignty—between the individual and the social whole—, the presidential rhetoric is suffused with religious ideas and references. My paper also tries to track those references empirically.

### **THE KATECHON AND THE MESSIAS: TIME, HISTORY, AND THREAT IN BRAZIL'S ASPIRATIONAL FASCISM**

**Bruno Reinhardt (Federal University of Santa Catarina)**

Since 2013 Brazil has been experiencing a crisis in the political, a rupture and rapture in the very foundations that sustain society, history and politics as meaningful, operational concepts. The rise to power of Jair Messias Bolsonaro's local breed of aspirational fascism both responded to and intensified such a temporal vortex tactically, albeit chaotically. In this article, I reflect about bolsonarismo's chronopolitics, especially the role played by threat and undecidability in its project of eroding the liberal democratic order from within. As a "reactionary revolution" or an "accelerationist conservatism", bolsonarismo is ungraspable through the linear, homogenous, empty time of secular historicism. It is better accessed through theopolitical figures such as the Katechon, a purely negative restrainer of chaos that both signals to and stands in the way of a messianic

denouement. I explore how this paranoid and undecided mode of government draws on and renews Brazil's authoritarian "mimetic archive", how it produces new political rituals and styles of publicity among its constituencies, and how it mobilizes threat as an atmospheric temporal medium. Such temporal dynamics was never as clear as in the 2021 Independence Day protests, when bolsonarismo made time by threatening to make history, before retreating.

### **SOVEREIGN INCISIONS**

**Maria José de Abreu (Columbia University)**

This paper reassesses the definition of political sovereignty through the example of Brazil's president Jair Messias Bolsonaro. If long defined through the problem of decision in extremis it asks: what happens to sovereignty (and thus to the idea of extreme), when rhythmic incision, rather than exceptional decision, becomes the defining element of the political? Specifically, the paper sets to analyze the complex ways that the alleged stabbing of Bolsonaro prior to—though perhaps determining of— the 2019 election's outcome, shaped the grounds for a particular kind of grammar of the political, and its relational extension to media technologies. Taking as center stage the president's scarred abdomen, the paper builds on the potentials of dehiscence in defining the scandalous body of politics and immunity protection in contemporary Brazil.

### **IMMANENT SINGULARITY AND THEOPOLITICAL CHARISMA**

**Valentina Napolitano (University of Toronto)**

Following up from the collective work on Theopolitics in/of the Americas (2020, Special issue, Social Analysis) this paper zooms into our collective crafting of a theopolitical toolkit in two, interconnected ways. First, through an engagement with the work on medieval, negative theology by Niklaus Largier together with the work by Kath Weston on an (un)tuning to an animate planet in times of predatory capitalism, I explore immanent singularity—a space-time conflation that has infinite openness and possibility based on active dis-imagination—as a potential tool to theopolitically engage with aspects of Latin American feminist critiques to current neoliberal political economy. Secondly, I explore another aspect of the study of theopolitics as a doing the work of undoing injustice, through



an example of the theopolitical charisma of Black soccer player Marcus Rashford, who has turned around PM Boris Jonson's policy of terminating school food vouchers' support for children in need, during the COVID and post-covid pandemics. I conclude by highlighting a theopolitical study of immanent singularity and a doing the work of undoing injustice as two areas/methodological tools for further our research on a political otherwise of/from the Americas and beyond.

### **HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: QANON AND ITS SEEKERS**

**Joseph Russo (Purchase College, SUNY)**

QAnon is a pro-Trump, quasi-secular millenarian movement that began online in October 2017 when a mysterious user called "Q" (short for Q Clearance Patriot) posted a series of cryptic, instructional warnings to "patriots" on the notoriously right-wing imageboard website 4chan. Q is now seeping into the collective consciousness and IRL events, heralding an era of societal unrest called The Storm that draws upon multiple previous conspiracy theories in a collection of beliefs that can be traced back to the early 20th century. Q is composed of a dazzling pastiche of theopolitical narratives which center around the idea that Donald Trump is battling a Deep State run by a Satanic pedophilic cabal whose members drink the adrenochrome-rich blood of children and clandestinely rule the world, hiding in plain sight. From this baseline allegation, hundreds of conspiracy theories reveling in the spectacular mythos of the American Uncanny (Lepselter, 2016) proliferate across epochs and cultures. My ethnographic foray into the lives and practices of American Q believers, which has culminated in two cross country road trips and many online interviews, attempts to bridge some of the gaps by attuning to confluences in the narrativization-interventionist "techniques" of a diverse, small group of believers whose employment of a hyperreal semiotic practice (Baudrillard, 1994) constitutes a modern structure of feeling (Williams, 1977). Anthropologists and conspiracy theorists both begin in the frame of "something is going on here which is not being told" — intuitively seeking to excavate the network of the hidden (Song, 2010). I look at Q believers not as uniformly antagonistic agents, but as "seekers," belonging to a subjectivity characterized by an incessant need to search for "the truth" through zealous theopolitical practices.

### **DO ARTIFACTS HAVE THEOPOLITICS? BOLSONARIST RESONANCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

**Letícia Cesarino (Federal University of Santa Catarina)**

This paper investigates the 'media politics of resonances' (Connolly, 2005) of Bolsonarism by recasting Langdon Winner's classic question about the politics of technical artifacts (Winner, 1980) in terms of digital media's emerging theopolitical entanglements. It draws on a neo-Batesonian approach to human-machine interaction derived from a comparative analysis of three ecosystems that grew around the figure of Jair Bolsonaro at different moments in Brazil (WhatsApp groups during the 2018 electoral campaign; the so-called 'early treatment' for covid-19 in 2020; and pro-Bolsonaro 'refracted publics' [Abidin, 2021] on Telegram in 2021). Communicational patterns transversal to these ecosystems evince a persistent dovetailing between conspirational discourses of revelation, and messianic discourses of regeneration. Drawing on examples from a field supposedly removed from both politics and theology — the 'alt-science' of early treatment (Cesarino and Silva, 2022) —, it suggests whether and how the 'conspiratorial' (Ward and Voas, 2010) forms that resonate across Bolsonarist ecosystems are being afforded by biases embedded in contemporary platform infrastructures (boyd, 2011; Chun, 2016, 2021).

### **A HOUSE UNDERGROUND: ANTISEMITIC CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THE CRISIS OF PLANETARY SOVEREIGNTY IN CHILEAN PATAGONIA**

**Carlota McAllister (York University)**

This paper discusses the resurgence of an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory known as the "Plan Andinia" in the midst of environmental struggle in remote Chilean Patagonia. It uses this resurgence to explore the recomposition of sovereignty and its proliferating theopolitical entanglements in the wake of the 21st century expansion of the extractive frontier ever deeper (geologically and geographically) into Latin American territories. The Plan Andinia, first "uncovered" in the 1960s by the sons of Adolf Eichmann, supposedly reveals the intentions of Jews (and an array of other shadowy global forces) to establish a second Jewish state in Patagonia, the southern tip of South America currently shared by the states of Chile and Argentina. In the 2010s, this conspiracy theory began to

circulate anew in southern Aysén, then the site of a conflict over a proposed megadam project. *Gauchos* living in the region began to accuse Douglas Tompkins, an American multimillionaire (and Gentile) who had spent the two previous decades purchasing millions of hectares of Patagonian land for conservation and parkification, of building a giant house underground on a former sheep estancia he had acquired for rewilding, where Israeli forces could await the operationalization of the plan. This paper situates these accusations in the context of older fantastical stories about the genocidal colonization of Latin America's "last frontier," in which Jews and *gauchos* appear as parallel figures of lability, errancy, opacity, anarchy, and marginality, distinguished by gaucho Christianity, but nonetheless sometimes cryptically mutating into one another. Showing how the subsoil abode Tompkins was allegedly building can be seen as a literal "digging-in" of the vertical forms of sovereignty that have long construed both Jews and *gauchos* as theopolitically dangerous, this paper argues that the delirious resonances of the Plan Andinia on the expanding Patagonian frontier point to wider contests over the political and its futures in the face of increasingly imminent planetary crisis.

# Speakers

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**MAREIKE WINCHELL** (PhD, Anthropology, UC Berkeley, 2015) is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chicago, with affiliations in the Center for the Study of Race, Culture, and Politics, the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, and the Divinity School. Winchell's first book, *After Servitude: Elusive Property and the Ethics of Kinship in Bolivia* (University of California Press, 2022), traces competing ethical projects of historical repair related to legacies of labor subjection and sexual violence in central Bolivia.

**LUCIANA CHAMORRO ELIZONDO** (Ph.D., Anthropology, Columbia University, 2020) is a WCED Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Michigan. She is a political anthropologist who specializes in Central America and writes on revolution and its afterlives, populist politics, authoritarianism, affect and aesthetics. Her larger conceptual interests are in political theology, debt, inheritance and generational difference, political violence, and feminist and queer imaginaries of the future.

**CLAUDIO LOMNITZ** (PhD, Anthropology, Stanford, 1987) is the Campbell Family Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University. Lomnitz works on the history, politics and culture of Latin America, and particularly of Mexico. Some of his publications are: *Evolución de una sociedad rural* (Mexico City, 1982), *Exits from the Labyrinth: Culture and Ideology in Mexican National Space* (California, 1992), *Modernidad Indiana* (Mexico City, 1999) and *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minnesota, 2001).

**BRUNO REINHARDT** (PhD, Anthropology, UC Berkeley, 2013) is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil. He is an anthropologist of religion and secularism with field research in Ghana and Brazil. His main conceptual interests are religious pedagogy and ethical subject

formation, the economic theology of religious institutions, and religious mediatization.

**MARIA JOSÉ DE ABREU** (PhD Anthropology, University of Amsterdam 2009) is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University. Her work engages with a range of anthropological, philosophical and literary debates about religion, personhood, the human senses and their technological extensions. Special focus is given to logics and grammars of the political in current neoliberal governance. She is the author of “The Charismatic Gymnasium: breath, media and religious revivalism in contemporary Brazil” and of numerous articles and essays. She is on the board of *Journal of Public Culture*.

**VALENTINA NAPOLITANO** is a Professor of Anthropology and a Connaught Scholar at the University of Toronto. She works on Critical Catholic Studies, borderlands and migration, affective histories, political theology and anthropology of traces. She is the author, among other works of *Migrant Hearts and the Atlantic Return* (2016) and *Migration, Mujercitas, and Medicine Men* (2002), and co-editor of *The Anthropology of Catholicism: A Reader* (2017, with Kristin Norget and Maya Mayblin). She is the co-recipient of a Connaught Global Challenge Award for a research project titled “Entangled Worlds: Sovereignty, Sanctities and Soil,” and she has been working on a project on holy infrastructures at the Detroit-Windsor corridor.

**JOSEPH RUSSO** (PhD, Anthropology, University of Texas, Austin, 2018) is Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Purchase College, State University of New York. His work focuses on postindustrial depression in the American South. His ethnography *Hard Luck in the Golden Triangle: Gnarled Ecologies of Southeast Texas* is under contract with Duke University Press.

**LETÍCIA CESARINO** (PhD, Anthropology, UC Berkeley, 2013) is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Federal University of Santa Catarina. She is currently developing two mixed-methods projects on politics and digital media in Brazil: one on far right ecosystems on Telegram, with the Digital Humanities Lab at the Federal University of Bahia, and another on context collapse and political polarization on Facebook, with the University of São Paulo.

**CARLOTA MCALLISTER** (PhD, Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, 2003) is associate professor in the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change at York University who studies the formation of political and moral agency in moments of conflict or crisis in agrarian communities in Latin America. She is the co-editor, with Diane Nelson, of *War by Other Means: Aftermath in Postgenocide Guatemala*, and, with Valentina Napolitano, of a special issue of *Social Analysis* on “Theopolitics in/of the Americas.”



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