Narrating the *Mensalão* trial: configurations of corruption

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Introducing the trial of the mensalão.

The mensalão scandal (a Brazilian neologism for big monthly payments) has drawn headlines throughout the country since 2005[2]. Money was allegedly pulled from slush funds of the governing Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) and dealt out to Brazilian Congressmen in order to sway votes.

The trial of 2012 before the *Supremo Tribunal Federal* (the Supreme Federal Court, henceforth STF) was big news as well: The exceptional number of defendants, their political positions, the vast amount of documents, and the potential to seriously harm the governing party fuelled the intense interest of the media. As the trial progressed, the adamant will of the majority of judges to condemn political corruption severely were also hailed as a historical event, a milestone in the country's continuous battle against corruption.

The trial of the mensalão, however, commanded the attention of the media for a variety of reasons, through a range of narratives and by activating many different actors and ontologies. Though it resulted in prison sentences for former PT leaders and prominent business people, the so-called "trial of the century" (Rangel 2012a) was not a

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[2] The mensalão case has already been a focus or partial topic of several academic papers, including Barreiros & Amoroso 2008, Fraundorfer & Llanos 2012, Goldfrank & Wampler 2008, Hunter & Power 2007, Miguel & Coutinho 2007, Pereira et. al 2008, de Souza 2011, Taylor & Buranelli 2007, and Vasconcellos 2006 (see also Clausen 2012).

clear-cut story in the public sphere. This article explores the different narrative configurations of the corruption case, and asks which actors backed and reproduced the contested tales of corruption. How did these narratives emerge and condense, eventually informing and legitimizing public protests and political skirmishes? Ultimately, how do such narrative configurations of corruption reflect and impact on representations of political reality in the public sphere of Brazil?

Deploying critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough 2003) and framing analysis (Entman 2010, Snow & Benford 2000) as the tools, I will explore the research programme suggested by narrative theorists such as Margaret Somers (Somers & Gibson 1994, Somers 1994) and Francesca Polletta (Polletta 2006) by examining history in the making, as it were. At the outset, I view the narratives embedded in media texts concerning the mensalão as a case of co-existing knowledges – before the moment in which one hegemonic narrative emerges. Reflecting and reacting upon each other, different interpretations of the unfolding events constitute a complex assemblage of contingent stories, actors, and relations. The sheer quantity of stories about the mensalão and its rich pool of plotlines makes it well suited to be the object of an analysis of narrative dynamics, demonstrating how stories "set the very terms of strategic action" (Poletta 2006:4), as well as yielding concrete insights into the interplay of Brazilian politics and media.

I will investigate this by first examining a number of media texts concerning the mensalão trial, drawn from the most prominent Brazilian media outlets. Secondly, through analysis of these samples, four narratives concerning the mensalão case and the trial are identified. Finally, these narratives' distinct ways of interpreting corruption and mobilizing heterogeneous actors are unpacked, in order to discern the narrative's relations to political, institutional and social actors, as well as their implied lines of action.

Sampling strategy: Selecting examples of mensalão stories in Brazilian media.

In the following, I will describe and analyse examples of the coverage in five different media outlets, extracting these samples from the weekly magazines *Veja* and *CartaCapital*, the daily newspapers *Estado de São Paulo* and *Folha de São Paulo*, as well as the thematic website of the *Globo* news-site *G1*.

The sampling of media outlets are based on three criteria, namely:

1. a criterion of public penetration; the chosen media outlets represent the most widely read papers and the central news agencies of Brazil (Abramo 2007:95, Miguel & Coutinho 2007:102, Júnior 1998:23),
2. the variation in ownership; as Brazilian media is held in the hands of just a few companies (Matos 2011:181, 192), the chosen media outlets cover a range of owners and conglomerates, and finally
3. the variation of their political orientation; *CartaCapital* has been notoriously pro-PT, in contrast to *Globo* and *Veja*, for instance (Barreiros & Amoroso 2008).

Relying mainly on textual rather than televised material, this selection deliberately give priority to written discourse in order to extract the least ambiguous samples of narratives about the mensalão case.

From each of these sources, one or several samples are briefly described and analysed in the following. The sampled news items span editorials, commentary, news articles, and an online montage. The items lie within a chronological range encompassing the onset of the trial itself and on to the events surrounding the final stages of the conviction, i.e. from early August 2012 until the start of 2013. They are not representative in the strict sense of reflecting the average coverage, but have been

picked out for this article with the intent of exemplifying specific narratives. Where several items have been used as examples, the intention has been to reach empirical saturation (Strauss & Glaser 1967), i.e. adding data until no new perspective emerge from further additions. In the estimation of the empirical saturation, a risk of producing a confirmation bias is inherent: Looking for recognizable patterns can hardly be said to be a disinterested endeavour. The hermeneutic task of interpreting texts, discourse and frames must therefore be supplemented by reviews of other studies that treat some of the same content matter or sources in order to qualify the findings[3].

Methodology for Critical Narrative Analysis

Although a corruption scandal may represent a special case of media content, because it taps into certain symbolic domains and enables particular power relations (Koechlin 2013, Thompson 2000:235ff), a general, three-level approach for analysing media samples is used in the following. Here, the critical discourse analysis (CDA) laid out by Norman Fairclough (1995, 2003) is used especially for connecting the semantic spaces of each media text to the discourse of social and political practice in Brazilian society. Another important aspect of CDA is the emphasis placed upon the selections and intertextuality of discourse (ibid.:47). Fairclough stresses the critical potential of analysis that lays bare the mechanisms of domination and hegemony at work in the interplay between discourse and social practice.

[3] Validating interpretations is of course not ultimately possible, as it remains an open-ended process. However, by comparing my selections analysed below with earlier studies of news items from *Veja, CartaCapital, O Globo, Folha* and *Estado*, (in Barreiros & Amoroso 2008, Miguel & Coutinho 2007, and Vasconcellos 2008), it is possible to relate my sampling to previous analyses of news items from preceding periods, in which similar or parallel semiotic structures, narrative content and symbolic dimensions have been detected by other researchers.

Beyond this, CDA is supplemented with framing analysis, which provides a strong basis for interpreting how textual selections of quotes, pictures, and headlines feed into the *framing* of the news (Entman 2010, Snow & Benford 2000). Framing is in this approach understood to be the process which the media use "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman 1993:52, emphasis removed).

The framings of the mensalão case, in turn, draw upon broader narratives concerning Brazilian society and politics, to which I shall return after this section. Narratives, in the theoretical framework of Somers and Polletta, amongst others, are assemblages of not only problems and solutions, but integrated ontologies of the social. Connecting agency and characters through emplotment (Somers 1994:616), narratives possess temporally configurative capacities that enable meaning-making and project identity-formation (Polletta 1998:139). Narratives thus structure semantic spaces temporally and causally by locating actors, contexts and frames in plots. The narrative analysis is the most abstract layer of the three-level approach used in the following. It links the (micro-)semantic spaces of news texts to (meso-)frames of the media, and connects frames, news selections and intertextuality to (macro-)cultural Brazilian repertoires of meaning.

Globo - G1

Starting with the *Globo*-owned website *G1.globo.com*, a particularly good example of the media's dramatizing or entertaining effects (Fairclough 1995:10) was published at the end of the mensalão trial, on 17 December (O Globo 2012). Right after the last sentence

was pronounced in the Supreme Court (*Supremo Tribunal Federal*, or STF) in Brasília, a summarizing assemblage or *infographic* was published online, under the headline "10 Conclusions of the Trial". These conclusions were not uncontested in the Brazilian mediascape, a point to which I will return later. The framing of the trial produced by *G1* connects to these other views of the mensalão case, subtly denying such competing representations and positioning the view of the Globo conglomerate as the objectively correct one.

The infographic assembled quotes from the judges and short summaries concerning the sentences, actors and proceedings, on top of striking background graphics drawn from the main events of the trial. While the visual aesthetics is not overly important in the other examples presented, this particular example of media coverage used pictures to some extent, supporting certain framings. The majority of the photos, selected by the *G1* editors as the backdrop of their conclusions, made a point of showing the strong and decisive judges reacting against the threat of corruption. Thereby, the website illustrations establish certain interpretations of identities (Fairclough 1995:5, 2002:27). At the very top of the webpage, the judge and head of the trial (*ministro relator*) Joaquim Barbosa points his index finger accusingly towards the spectator, stern eyes behind his glasses. Three other photos depict judges in action, all of them decisive, collected, and in control. Thus framing the judges as the active and righteous protagonists of the story, the reader is primed for certain sympathies and dislikes throughout the website's textual material. In contrast, three of the culprits, José Dirceu, José Genoino and Delubio Soares, are depicted as a chain gang in a photographic montage next to the fifth conclusion, visually placing unequivocal blame by invoking an iconic representation of convicts.

The conclusions themselves assert the findings of the judges: Translating directly, these state that 1) the mensalão plot actually existed, that 2) 25 of the 37 persons on trial

were found guilty, that 3) former secretary of the Cabinet José Dirceu was in charge, that 4) politicians from non-government parties sold their votes, and that 5) the leaders of the Partido dos Trabalhadores steered these dealings. Furthermore, *G1* concludes that 6) executives of the Banco Rural commited fraud, that 7) money was diverted from the parliament, that 8) both operators and recipients of money white-washed the money, that 9) the iconic spin doctor Duda Mendonça, conversely, was found innocent, and finally that 10) the bank executives, advertisement company and the government party formed an illegal group of interests (*quadrilha*). While this summary might seem compact, the text sections of *G1* are kept equally minimal: No conclusion is longer than four sentences. Instead, the site relies on direct quotes from the judges to support the dramatizing frame.

Among these, Judge Celso de Mello is cited first, stating: "Corruption hinders a nation's capacity for growing and prospering". This quote implies a narrative of growth and development, specifically feeding into the tale of Brazil's economic and democratic take-off, and the quote is followed by another one tapping into another narrative presupposition: Judge Carlos Ayres Britto is quoted saying "If the corrupt politician's conscience is bought, the entire population is betrayed, because it betrays the popular mandate, given by the people". The (Brazilian) reader is thus made to partake in an imagined community (Anderson 1983), on its way to national development and economic success, but sadly deceived by the mensalão plotters. In this way, the selection of quotes imply a moral assessment of the situation (Entman 1993), all the while staying neutral at the surface level by simply reporting what the judges said. This claim to objectivity is emphasized in the headline itself: "10 Conclusions of the Trial" strongly implies objectivity and factuality, all the while referring to the active denials of the mensalão spouted by the PT and the former president Lula during the later years (after famously admitting to do "what every Brazilian party does", Monteiro 2005).

In sum, through the selection of quotes and the framing of these as "conclusions", *Globo* is reproducing and stabilizing a narrative of a prosperous nation let down by amoral politicians., all the while casting the judges as the protagonists of the trial. Even though the website professes direct, unmediated access to the events of the trial, both quotes and photos chosen for the infographic support an unequivocal condemnation of the mensalão scheme, the network of business leaders and especially the cadre of the PT behind it.

Estado de São Paulo

The strong focus on individuals, especially in the contrast between just judges and corrupt politicians, is also a key element of the coverage in the São Paulo-based daily *Estado de São Paulo*. In the coverage from 18 December 2012, the contrast is expressed as an open conflict between the dean of the Supreme Judges, Celso de Mello, and the president of Deputies' Chamber, Marco Maia (also a member of the Partido dos Trabalhadores). On the last ordinary day of the trial, Celso de Mello affirmed that members of parliament sentenced to more than four years of prison would be stripped of their position in Congress. In the article "It's not admissible, says Celso de Mello regarding resistance", the dean of the STF is quoted severely criticizing Maia and his resistance to such exclusions from the Congress:

> E inadmissível o comportamento de quem, demonstrando não possuir o necessário senso de institucionalidade, proclama que não cumprirá uma decisão do Supremo Tribunal Federal transitada em julgado, que incumbido como guardião da Constituição pela própria Assembleía

> Constituinte, tem o monopólio da última palavra em matéria de interpretação da Constituição. (Brito 2012)

Earlier, Marco Maia stated that the revoking of Congress seats was a decision to be made in Congress itself. This, according to de Mello, slowed the workings of justice and amounted to misconduct and exploitation of office. Celso de Mello was furthermore quoted as saying: "Not even a equivocal spirit of solidarity should lead to such unacceptable and irresponsible statements about not following the rulings of STF". At the end of the article, another judge, Carmen Lucia, remarks that she doesn't "believe this is a crisis. It's very artificial. And also, it isn't credible that somebody wouldn't fulfil the judiciary's ruling in any way". This mitigating opinion, however, stands alone and almost forgotten in the issue of *Estado*, a relegation that in itself speaks volumes about the intentions of the journalists and editors: Conflict is the frame chosen for this final event of the trial.

In a parallel article, "The President of the Chamber affirms interference", Marco Maia is characterized through fierce metaphors and descriptions alluding to war and trials of combat:

> [Maia] acusou ontem o Supremo Tribunal Federal de ter "invadido prerrogativas" do Congresso ao determinar que os três parlamentares condenados no julgamento do mensalão estão impedidos de exercer seus mandatos... "Quando uma matéria julgada pelo STF não condiz com o que prevê a Constituição, é sinal de que houve uma ingerência de um poder em outro que tem garantido seu direito de tratar sobre a cassação de mandato de parlamentares", afirmou. (Mendes 2012)

The semantic content of this article is clearly drawing upon a conflict frame: Invasion, hindrances, interference and accusations are characteristic and colourful ways of framing the discussion concerning constitutional prerogatives. Continuing this line, the article states that Maia, feeling that his prerogatives were invaded, refrained from once again threatening with civil disobedience. Instead he hoped for the rest of the STF to reverse the dean's statement. According to Maia, the invasion of the legislative branch of government by the judiciary branch had presumably evolved in an emotional climate, and he "doubted that Supreme judges would really threaten the President of the Chamber of Deputies".

By representing the two contesting branches of government through two individual actors, the systemic conflict between the judiciary and the legislative body is made tangible in this issue of *Estado*. The problem of prerogatives and constitutional rights is indirectly reduced to the question of which person is more credible. By relegating intermediary opinions between de Mello's and Maia's positions to the very end of one article, and by obscuring the journalistic agenda of simplifying a complex matter by placing emphasis (in headings and in the selection of material) on the conflict, *Estado's* news articles present the reader with a story of clear-cut disagreement. In a commentary in the same issue, however, columnist and law expert Rafael Queiroz remarks that this specific struggle merely is a symptom of the mensalão case (Queiroz 2012):

> Quem sempre via com desconfiança a atuação da Justiça em casos de corrupção política e financeira assistiu, neste caso, a uma inversão de roteiro: os cabeças dos diversos núcleos foram condenados a altas penas, que seguramente redundarão em tempo significativo de cumprimento de prisão, enquanto os obreiros e "mequetrefes" de toda sorte, se não

> foram absolvidos, receberam penas menores. Socialmente, fica a imagem de que o STF recebeu um caso difícil, do ponto de vista técnico e também político, e cumpriu, de forma intensa, o seu papel: não capitulou.... Na disputa com o Legislativo […] consolidou o entendimento de que cabe ao Supremo, como guarda da Constituição, dar a palavra final sobre as competências e atribuições de cada um dos poderes. (Queiroz 2012)

The dispute is thus a case of a turning tide in the political make-up of Brazil: In Quieroz' analysis, power is flowing from the hands of politicians into the courtrooms. The articles about Maia and de Mello support such an interpretation by representing de Mello as the just and honourable judge, while Maia is represented as war-mongering and aggressive. The stand-off between two bases of state power results in a net gain of legitimacy for the judiciary.

Veja

A similar assessment of the situation can be found in *Veja,* issue 2290 from October 2012. Here, Supreme Judge and leader of the trial process, *ministro relator* Joaquim Barbosa, is heralded on the front page the as "The Poor Kid Who Changed Brazil". Inside the issue, an article titled "The Triumph of Justice" details the life of Barbosa and his success in the mensalão case (Marques & Diniz 2012). The article states that Barbosa and the rest of the STF Judges, "by pointing out the way to prison for the corrupted and the corruptors, […] gave Brazil the courage to believe that the Judiciary is there to punish those who do not obey the Law, independent of the colour of their shirt or collar" (ibid.:71).

Barbosa, who one month later took the mantle of presidency in the STF as the first black Supreme Judge, is described as a staunch defender of equality – political, judicial and racial. By not interviewing Barbosa directly, the article keeps a certain distance to its object, and in a way adds to the iconic status of the *ministro relator*. The article emphasizes that Barbosa keeps his distance to the former president Lula - not surprisingly, as *Veja* has historically been very critical of the former president (Barreiros & Amoroso 2008). According to the article, in spite of several invitations, Barbosa never participated in informal games of football at the presidential palace, even though Barbosa was headhunted for the job by Lula's cabinet. *Veja* thus discursively insulates Barbosa from the corrupt party that vested him with judiciary power, despite the obvious connections.

The same critical stance towards the former president is evident in the *Veja* (issue 2287) edition one month earlier. Here, under the heading "The Secrets of Valerio", the condemned business leader, advertising CEO and culprit in the mensalão case Marcos Valerio speaks his mind (Rangel 2012b). Laden with accusations against the former president and the PT, in the centrepiece article Valerio is depicted as an expendable pawn of a larger scheme:

> Valério guarda segredos tão estarrecedores sobre o mensalão que não consegue mais reter só para si - mesmo que agora, desiludido com a falsa promessa de ajuda dos poderosos que ele ajudou, tenha um crescente temor de que eles possam se vingar dele de forma ainda mais cruel. Os segredos de Valério, se revelados, põem o ex-presidente Lula no epicentro do escândalo do mensalão. (Rangel 2012b)

The article goes on to affirm that Lula and several other top dogs of the PT had ruined the life of Valerio and his family, threatened and bullied his wife into depression, and yet remain unpunished by the mensalão trial. This issue of *Veja* thus frames the mensalão case as inadequate, missing its mark and even deliberately covering up the truth by setting up Marcos Valerio[4].

Though internally inconsistent in regards to the ultimate success of the trial, the two articles from *Veja* consistently locates the ex-president in the epicenter of the scandal, continuing the campaign for impeaching Lula that had been a central subject to *Veja* even as the mensalão scandal surfaced (Barreiros & Amoroso 2008:127). Though *Veja's* praising of Barbosa in the first article presented actually implies that the trial has been a success, the article about Valerio's confessions remains consistent with these earlier allegations, maintaining a continuous intertextual narrative of presidential transgression.

CartaCapital

The shortcomings of the mensalão trial are also in question in a handful of editorials published in *CartaCapital*. The left-wing weekly magazine, in contrast to *Veja*, has supported the former president since the onset of the scandal (ibid.). Starting with the editorial "The Questions Not Answered Concerning the Mensalão", published shortly after the initiation of the trial, the magazine points out a series of inconsistencies in the trial's filing (CartaCapital 2012). The presupposition of the case is characterized as incongruent and devoid of evidence, and the editorial points out several business

[4] This kind of scandalous insinuations might seem unlikely to some in its resemblance to a full-blown conspiracy theory, but as *Veja* is the most widely read publication in Brazil, publishing around a million copies each week (Malin 2013), this interpretation of the mensalão case has resonance to some degree. In fact, the historical scoreboard of Brazilian politics is ripe with scandals, secret networks and political assassinations (Taylor 2009, 2010).

people not on trial that might as well have been tried. These holes in the filing lead to several questions not answered.

As the trial progressed, more editorials deepened the critique of the trial. The columnist Luis Nassif remarks in a comment in October that in order for the mensalão case to change anything in the ever-corrupt mire of Brazilian politics, the principles followed by the judges in the process must also be applied to other cases, especially those pinpointed by the first editorial:

> … ambos, a [Procurador-geral da República] e o STF, terão que se debruçar sobre outros casos e julgá-los de acordo com os mesmos critérios, para comprovar isonomia e para explicitar para os operadores de direito que a jurisprudência, de fato, mudou e não é seletiva. É bonito ouvir um Ministro do STF afirmar que a condenação do "mensalão" mostra que não apenas pés-de-chinelo que são condenados. Mas e os demais? (Nassif 2012b)

The culprits and suspects of these other cases, together with the big media, are characterized in a comment by the editor and founder of *CartaCapital*, Mino Carta, as members of a fifth column hiding in the shadow of the mensalão case:

> Observam meus perplexos botões como às vezes caiba questionar o poder do próprio governo ao vê-lo forçado a compromissos e concessões. Por que de quando em quando, mas como o pano de fundo de uma ameaça constante, surge a forte impressão de que uma espécie de quinta coluna agita-se dentro de suas fronteiras, formada à sombra de seus aliados e mesmo dentro do PT? (Carta 2012)

Carta goes on to say that the eponymous monthly payments never happened, and that his magazine had always held them to be impossible, but that the case eclipses other criminal activity, thereby escaping media attention. In another commentary on 13 November by sociologist Marcos Coimbra, the judges are accused of being partial, hungry for the media spotlight, and trying to cleanse Brazilian politics all by themselves (Coimbra 2012). Combining these accusations with the other commentaries and editorials of *CartaCapital*, the magazine plays in the same rhetoric ballpark as *Veja*, but chooses to convey a reversal of *Veja's* claims. Both magazines present the trial as just a scratch in the surface of a bigger network of criminal power players, but place these in opposite parts of Brazil's political sphere: *CartaCapital* sees vested interests in the courts and the media newsrooms, where *Veja* finds them inside the PT.

Folha de São Paulo

In another São Paulo-based daily, the *Folha*, the same theme is suggested in the issue from 10 January 2013. Drawn from a rare interview with the federal attorney general, Roberto Gurgel, a single quote suggesting that the mensalão trial was indeed inadequate is displayed on the front page. Gurgel is quoted stating that "The Mensalão Went Further, Says Attorney General" ("*Mensalão é muito maior, afirma procurador-geral*"), and the short article on the front page explains that at the time of the filing of the case, no robust proof of the president's guilt existed (Seligman & Leitão 2013a), implying that evidence had surfaced since. However, in the interview itself, Gurgel goes on to say that he never saw a minimum of evidence pointing to Lula's involvement, and that missing such consistent proof, it would be irresponsible to denounce a president (Seligman & Leitão 2013b).

By placing the quote implying more scandals and villains yet to be revealed at the very top of the paper, *Folha* also taps into the conspiracy theory territory, albeit neglecting to point out clearly where these perpetrators might hide. The insinuations of the quote, though not developed in the interview itself, are apparently the most newsworthy part of the interview that also discusses the (apparently negligible) value of Marcos Valerio's new denouncements. The fact that such a quote made it to the front page strongly suggests the attraction of a good scandal to Brazilian editors and, presumably, readers.

Four narratives of the mensalão case

Based on these sampled news items, four different takes on the mensalão case can be discerned. These four narratives are distributed unevenly throughout the landscape of the major media outlets. As two of the narratives share the same structure, I only distinguish three basic types of story, and hence number the narratives 1 through 3 with a variation in the second narrative structure.

Commenting on each of these narratives in turn, I will address these narratives' relations to broader narratives of Brazilian society in the following section. By analysing their temporal and moral structures as well as connections to actors and institutions in the political sphere, and by connecting these narrative structures to the question of agency, I hope to shed some light on the "creative and functional capacities: in other words how statements on corruption occur, and what they accomplish" (Breit 2011:3) when embedded in narratives. By assembling and uniting heterogeneous actors, ideologies and knowledges in a particular plotline, the narratives vie for the place of hegemonic truth; and by breaking these assemblages down, we might be able to "trace the careers of particular stories, exposing not only the political processes by which they

come to be tellable or authoritative but also the dynamics by which newly legitimated stories produce new modes of action and new terrains of contention" (Polletta 2006:7).

A milestone in the combat against corruption: Narrative 1

According to the website produced for *O Globo* and the *Veja* article hailing Barbosa as a juridical prodigy, the case was a watershed in Brazilian society. Piloted by staunch judges, the trial changed the rules of the national political game, making it clear that the law henceforth is upheld for common citizens and aloof politicians alike. This narrative postulates a basic discontinuity effected by the mensalão trial. Operating within a progressive temporality, the Brazilian nation has come to be prosperous but pestered by corruption and other forms of dysfunctional governing. This narrative, in turn, relies on several other narratives and conceptions, each of those projecting certain ideals and beliefs about the actors and institutions involved in this "milestone" narrative.

The journalists and editors in several instances use the case to emphasize the role of investigative media as the fourth branch of government, monitoring the quality of democracy on behalf of the people. In my examples, this is most explicit in the weekly magazines (Rangel 2012b, CartaCapital 2012). The journalists are inscribed in this narrative as protagonists, fighting for transparency and democracy.

Establishing such roles in narrative 1 relies on certain Western conceptions of good governance, rational bureaucracy and liberal democracy. The ideal of clean, transparent bureaucracy as described by Weber (Weber 1978) draws upon core beliefs of modern law, such as equality before the law, harking back to Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* (2003 [1690]) and the theory of natural rights.[5] Looking at the history of

[5] Such ideals appear in stark contrast to the Brazilian juridical tradition of *foro privilegiado*, "the privileged assembly", which specifies that politicians and officials should be tried before a court higher than ordinary

impunity in Brazilian politics prior to the "Clean Slate"-legislation, the ideal projected in this narrative might seem a far cry from reality (Figueiredo 2010, Taylor & Power 2011:2, Silva 1999:28), but by reproducing the narrative of discontinuity, the pattern of impunity is challenged. For this reason, many of the judges' quotations on the G1-website implies narrative 1, representing the Supreme Court as the locus of much-needed justice in Brazilian politics, even though the STF hitherto has been unable to impose much precedence at lower juridical levels (Taylor 2005:425, Brinks 2005:618), and despite the population's lack of faith in the functionality of the courts (Galindo 2003, Nascimento & Barros 1995, Canache & Allison 2005).

Of course, notions such as transparency and good governance have become buzzwords in Brazil, as well as the rest of the world, partly due to efforts of several international actors. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and NGOs such as Transparency International have been central to the development of the modern corruption discourse since the early 1990's (ibid.:94, Ballard 1999:233, Anders & Nuijten 2008, Taylor & Power 2011:3), followed by a marked increase in academic interest (ibid.:8). West and Sanders suggest that "[c]ontemporary transparency claims constitute yet another way of celebrating the rationality of modern society" (West and Sanders 2003:7ff), and along this line of argumentation, the claims reinforced by narrative 1 can be said to reproduce a familiar series of dichotomies in modern political discourse: Modern government should be open, clean, transparent and above all rational, as opposed to traditional, paternalistic and corrupt rulers characterized by opaque and secret dealings.

Though the incumbent president Dilma Rousseff at one point noted to the Spanish daily *El Pais* (Cebrián 2012) that the STF was not above human error, the trial

defendants. Attorneys invoked this even during the last phase of the mensalão case, hoping to slow down the process (Borges 2012).

and sentences suited the president quite well at other times. Being able to guarantee the "order and progression" proudly displayed on the nation's flag, the mensalão trial was interpreted by Dilma as a final showdown against corruption (e.g. Rousseff 2012), thus aiding her in projecting an image of her government as untainted by corruption.

Several important actors in Brazil thus back this first narrative, viewing the case as a milestone against corruption that carries the potential for breaking the vicious cycle of corruption. What this narrative accomplishes, then, is the welding together of perspectives, a shared story of success and a common horizon of expectation regarding political corruption. As we shall see later, such a fusion of narrative structure and interests of different actors and institutions can be brittle as glass, though it may shine in the spotlight.

A deeper scheme: Narrative 2a and 2b

Two narratives portray the mensalão case as a cover-up. In the first version of this narrative, there are more sinister motives, deeper corrupt networks and higher political involvement yet to be revealed, all the way to the top of the former government. Thus, in the second *Veja* article, the trial has not reached the root of the problem, which stems from the former president himself. A select cadre from the PT and their *pater familia* Lula are responsible for framing Valerio and other of the defendants, while escaping conviction themselves. The *Folha* front page plays along with such assumptions, but remains reluctant to spell out the consequences in the interview with the state attorney general.

In the second version, which can be abstracted from commentaries and editorials in *CartaCapital*, the trial has been a farce, constructed by the media and executed by the judiciary branch. Certain business leaders, standing to gain from the displacement of

attention, hover behind the conspiracy, and the inconsistencies of the mensalão trial are due to the forged origin of the case. In this version, the sinister motives and corrupt networks can be traced to the top of the STF and the boards of the media conglomerates. Understanding such claims and the ways in which conspiracy theory informs popular conceptions of politics in general, and mensalão in particular, requires a brief sketch of contemporary anthropological insights in the field of conspiracies.

According to the historian Mark Fenster, conspiracy theories should not be viewed as pathological political imagination, but rather as an assemblage of practices, including cultural, political, religious, and even consumer practices (Fenster 2008), or stated differently, a cultural space for new modes of political agency (Harding & Stewart 2003:282). West and Sanders (2003:3) define the conspiracy as a populist narrative mode critical of elite power, while Comaroff and Comaroff go even further, stating that

Conspiracy, in short, has come to fill the explanatory void, the epistemic black hole, that is increasingly been said to have been left behind by the unsettling of moral communities, by the so-called crisis of representation, by the erosion of received modernist connections between means and ends, subjects and objects, ways and means. (Comaroff & Comaroff 2003:288)

The black hole of Brazilian politics is quite tangible, to be sure. *Coronelismo* (Leal 1997) and *o jeitinho* (Taylor 2010) still pervade and define network relations in Brazil, but these traditional forms of power structures, morally eroding as they might seem from a rational-bureaucratic point of view, are increasingly being supplanted by new relations: Foreign investments, new technology, international treaties and standards, and fiscal policies dictated by external actors. Thus, the opacity of global flows of influence and money spawns the need for interpretations that can account for such distant and menacing powers, while the ever-quickening pace of production and consumption is

bereft of moral standards for evaluating and making sense of the material conditions. One tool for prying meaning out of the modern condition is telling tales of conspiracy (Comaroff & Comaroff 2003:290).

Circularity, or cyclical time, is implied in the narratives of conspiracy. There is always more to know, more to reveal and more scandalous relations in the elite. This Freudian drive towards more disclosure cannot be sated: "there is always something more to know about an alleged conspiracy, the evidence of which is subjected to an investigative machine that depends on the perpetual motion of signification" (Fenster 2008:94). The epistemic black hole can never be fully revealed and described, leading to ever wilder and more extreme allegations. Because of this, conspiracy theory is particularly well suited as a subversive text genre, or indeed a populist discourse.

The narratives of conspiracy contain various populist elements. Of course, the definition of populism is contested (Jansen 2011), but traits of the conspiracy theory match well with populism: By criticizing the elite, portraying the actions of the powerful as amoral, positioning the storyteller in the role of the victim (or in a sympathizing role), and mobilizing through this critical stance, conspiracy fits into several conceptions of populism. In fact, the particular case of *Veja* and *CartaCapital*, with their essentially mirrored conspiracies, fits perfectly into the claims of Argentinian intellectual Ernesto Laclau. Laclau states that populism cannot be defined substantially, but only relationally, as opposition to the elite (Laclau 2005). In narrative 2a and 2b, we find the same mistrust and narrative structure, but pointing at different political circles.

In 2010, German sociologist Philip Kitzberger noted that the strategy of discrediting the big media was quite common to Latin America's leftist governments:

> … aimed at unveiling the media institutions' true nature and providing evidence of the bias and partisanship behind their self-presentation as

> impartial bodies, [this strategy] seeks to undermine their credibility and public legitimacy […] this response on the part of the left has taken a particular form. A common nucleus can be observed beyond particular contexts and inflections. The core assumption is that media and journalistic institutions are, despite their claims of neutrality, powerful social actors linked to the upper classes, social elites, or powerful corporations. (Kitzberger 2010:7)

As Kitzberger wrote this, however, the Brazilian government had yet to commit to the denouncement strategy seen in Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela. Mirroring these governments, and in line with *CartaCapital*, the PT has now embraced such a strategy, connecting the populism of the conspiracy theory to the anti-media discourse.

Concluding this section, I emphasize that the narratives 2a and 2b draw legitimacy of some classic Brazilian political traits, namely the mistrust of government (Hansen 2012:108, Taylor & Power 2011:4, Winters & Weitz-Shapiro 2010), and populism or neo-populism (Boas 2004). But part of the lure of conspiracy narratives also lies in the structure of the genre with its seemingly endless capacity for deepening a suspicion or expanding a scandal. Therefore, the weekly magazines, addressing specific audiences, make good use of the conspiracy. Due to the low requirements of evidence and tautological proof embedded in such narratives, the PT are happy to emulate Chávez, Correa, Kirchner and other Latin American presidents, throwing suspicion back at *Veja* and the rest of the media conglomerates.

The shifting balance of power: Narrative 3

Finally, according to *Estado* and the article describing Barbosa in*Veja,* the judiciary branch has initiated a tectonic movement in the power bases of society. In a dramatic struggle for political power between the Congress and the STF, the scale has tipped in favour of the judiciary branch. This shift strikes a new balance between the democratic institutions, by founding the legitimacy of government not on elections but rather on juridical and constitutional processes. Distinct from the first narrative, this third narrative entertains the idea of several possible configurations of power and the oscillation between them.

This narrative of conflict follows a classic and easily constructed narrative *schema* (Polletta 2006:13) in media texts, involving two opponents and some contested ground. In this case, it concerns legitimacy in government. Dramatizing a political question in this way has consequences, however. First of all, the personification of the contesting state powers reduces it to a question of supporting one or the other contestant. The individuals eclipse the system in this mode of representing the workings of political and juridical institutions, resulting in a clear-cut story of conflict without too many legislative specifics. The fact that the institutions themselves play along with this representation, and indeed ensure that their processes fit the media game, is called *mediatization* (Hjarvard 2013), suggesting that politics and law increasingly conform to the rules and rationalities of the media. Secondly, this narrative's mediatization of the mensalão trial as a conflict of government branches supersedes the issue of corruption. The rampant corruption and impunity, already mentioned in narrative 1, turns out to be a symptom of the struggle for power and legitimacy.

The struggle between power bases and upturning of the usual pattern contains racial elements as well. The shift in power is alluded at in *Estado*, but clear in the issue of

Veja hailing Barbosa's triumph, emphasizing his concern for the *democracia racial* of Brazil (Marques & Diniz 2012:72). As the first black president of the STF, his ascent through the courts might spell not merely justice for corrupt politicians, but also a visual shift in the image of legitimate power, adding more skin hues to the palette, and framing the typical white elite parliamentarians as villains.

Finally, the increased focus on the importance of the STF in Brazilian politics underscores the process of *judicialization*, the society-wide tendency for resolving conflicts through legal action (Porto 2012:150, Cavalcanti 2006:40, Kapiszewski 2010:52, Werneck Vianna et al. 2007). Represented by *Veja* and *Estado* as the rightful locus of order and democratic progress, the STF gains legitimacy, and ferments this itself by feeding into the news media's hunt for more news items, interviewees and comments.

By telling the story of the mensalão case as a narrative of conflict, in which the judiciary branch shows itself as the source and upholder of justice, certain processes such as mediatization and judicialization are subtly confirmed and reproduced. The basic question of trust in government, for many years marring Brazilian democracy, is cleaved in two, down-playing the equally relevant question of mistrust in the media raised by narrative 2a and 2b. Narrative 3 subscribes to the same ideal of transparency and good bureaucracy as narrative 1, but pays more heed to the relative status of the combatants than to the construction of functional checks and balances in Brazilian government.

Closing this section, I would like to emphasize that the narratives of the mensalão are intertwined; some of them negate another narrative (narrative 1 is negated by 2a and 2b), while some of them are inversing (2a inverts 2b) or embellishing other narratives (narrative 3 establishes prospects of a reversible power balance relative to narrative 1). As public discourse they must, as Michael Warner notes, co-exist in the public sphere, although they might engage different audiences and make different diagnoses and

prognoses (Warner 2002, Snow & Benford 1988). However, during 2013, several events transpired in Brazil that point to developments in the relations between these stories, affecting their internal dynamics, plausibility and authority. In the last section, I will try to link the four narratives to the protests of June 2013 and establish a perspective on the mensalão case as seen through the lens of the manifestations in the streets and on the Internet.

Narrative perspectives on political change in Brazil

In the four contesting narratives, it is possible to detect a range of configurations, spanning moral and ideological concepts (such as transparency and equality before the law), societal processes (such as mediatization and judicialization) and temporal structures (namely the linear, circular and oscillating temporality of narrative 1, 2a/2b, and 3). The political institutions, media, the ruling class and parties are assembled in varying ways by these narrative configurations, which provides important insights into "the social conditions in which [storytelling] are likely to become politically consequential" (Polletta 2006:167).

These social conditions include a repertoire of contention (Zald 1996:267), configurations of stories with sufficient political leverage and plausibility sustained by the reproduction in everyday discourse, in the media, and in the public practices of the political sphere. Certain structural conditions are also required, however. As recent commentators have observed in the vein of resource mobilization theory (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald 1996, McCarthy & Zald 1977), several such structural conditions for mobilization have been present in Brazil in the last few years (Moseley & Layton 2013). Economic and educational progress for the middle class together with dramatically increased networking opportunities constitute the mobilizing resources and structures

necessary for launching protests as wide-spread and extensive as those seen on the streets of Brazilian state capitals during June 2013. But these conditions are rarely sufficient, as mobilization normally requires that "people [...] feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, acting collectively, they can address the problem" (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald 1996:5).

As stated by numerous protesters and bloggers, the protests of June 2013 were "never just about the twenty centavos" ("*não é só por 20 centavos*"), referring to increases in public transportation fares. Rather, several social issues were raised during the so-called Vinegar Revolts (Rodrigues & Brancoli 2013, Alves 2013, Kolling 2013). Following the mass protests, the rushed reactions of president Rousseff and her cabinet indicated a diagnosis carried over from the mensalão case: Proposing a plebiscite, a call for referendum and constitutional reform, Rousseff vowed to up the ante in the combat against corruption (Rousseff 2013). Thus, the grievance construed by the government and by many protesters points to the tale of political corruption in Brazil. Providing the protesters with another focus of discontent, certain features of the mensalão narratives, lingering in the stock of cultural knowledges, re-surfaced in the public sphere.

As mentioned earlier, the assessment of the mensalão trial in the first narrative configuration seems too optimistic; the tale of a "triumph of justice" was certainly not a story told during the Vinegar Revolts. Though backed by several media outlets and the courts, the story of a nation progressing by shedding the backwards political attitude of clientelism and nepotism turned out to be quite fragile. As the monoliths of sports events mushroom throughout Brazil while the politicians remain ineffective facing rampant inflation and rising living costs, this narrative steadily loses credibility. This loss of credibility affects the dynamics of the whole narrative repertoire concerning the mensalão case, leaving room for other stories to emerge and thereby reconfigure the "terms of strategic interaction" in the public and political sphere (Polletta 2006:4). The

two narratives of conspiracy, meanwhile, are not strengthened further, but with the discrediting of the first narrative the conspiracies remain viable: If clean politics is still a pipe dream, then both narrative 2a and 2b are available for further exploration. Of course, as Fenster reminds us, this is always the case with stories based on hidden knowledge: A conspiracy's conclusion incessantly moves away from the present (Fenster 2008:94) by continuously interpreting new information as further signs of undisclosed activity. Such a Deleuzian desire for uncovering new layers of secrecy (Deleuze & Guattari 1977 [1973]) can also be observed in the constant media production of corruption narratives. locke

President Rousseff's move for referendum following the revolts, while described by some as merely a way to disguise inaction (Hunter 2013), can be seen as tapping accurately into the third narrative, placing faith in constitutional reform and the juridical system rather than the political culture of Brazil. The third narrative of the mensalão case might have been a factor underpinning the political reactions in the wake of the Vinegar Revolts, while the authoritativeness of the first narrative crumbles in the face of political decisions favouring prestigious projects and elite business rather than social developments.

Conclusion

Summing up, I find that between the various narratives concerning the trial of the mensalão case, certain aspects have come to the fore in the months following the trial, culminating with the protests of June 2013. While the moral assessment of corruption remains stable, condemning bribery and graft, the hopeful projection of clean politics has been eclipsed by the manifestations, showing that trust in politicians is not secured through one trial, however momentous. The STF and the system of courts could

potentially benefit from the trial, by taking up the mantle as the nation's source of order and progression. As a starting point for wiping the slate clean of decades of political impunity, the imagination of Brazilian justice and democracy has gained new narrative patterns.

By looking into this endgame of a corruption scandal using a narrative approach, I find several fruitful perspectives for an anthropology of corruption. In the vein of Akhil Gupta's influential article on this subject (Gupta 1995), Dieter Haller and Cris Shore (2005) suggest that corruption might be seen as "a polysemous and multi-stranded relationship and part of the way in which individuals connect with the state" (ibid.:7). Based on the narrative analysis of the mensalão trial, I would add that state agencies, institutions and other state actors also weave or break relationships through the production and dissemination of stories about corruption. As such, the narrative approach can extend the field of anthropological studies of corruption, and also inform reflections on institutional and political arrangements and organizations. The narrative strands of the mensalão case tie corruption, transparency, legitimacy and the division of government together in specific matrices, and thereby provide storytelling resources for interpreting power and justice in Brazilian society. Unravelling those matrices, we might glimpse even more possible trajectories of social and political developments.

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