

The Preemptive Counterrevolution and the Rise of the Far Right in Brazil

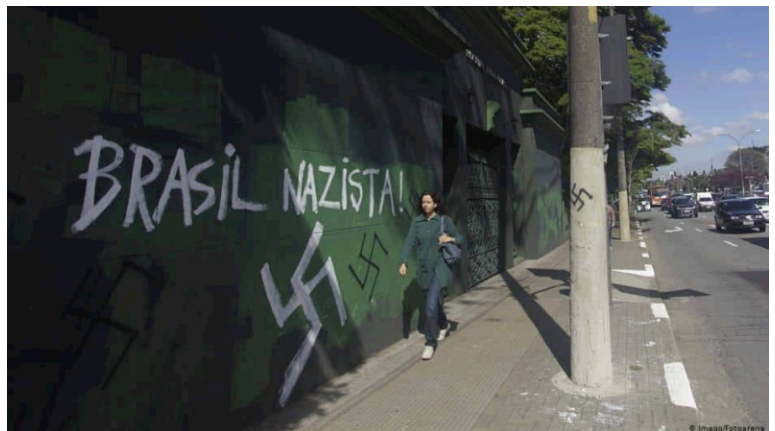
Finally, the scum of bourgeois society forms the holy phalanx of order and the hero Crapulinski installs himself in the Tuileries as the “saviour of society.”¹

—Karl Marx

Ricardo Antunes

Military Dictatorship and Neoliberalism: The Double Face of Barbarism

In 1964, after a period of intense capitalist development that significantly expanded the process of industrialisation, Brazil suffered a lasting political trauma. Politically unable to ensure their interests within the demarcations of bourgeois democracy, the ruling class turned to *manu militari*. A military coup was set and the dictatorship lasted until 1985. At the time, the dictatorship ensured the interests of the dominant classes, who feared the advances of popular and working-class struggles that had developed and intensified in the 1950s and '60s.



A swastika painted on a wall in Sao Paulo (Imago/Fotoarena). From "Brazil: German embassy triggers bizarre Nazi and Holocaust debate," DW, September 20, 2018.

Thus began a dictatorial period (1964–85) that Brazilian sociologist Florestan Fernandes characterised as a preemptive bourgeois counterrevolution.² Since its inception, the military dictatorship had a mystifying and manipulative character.

¹ ↪ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International, 1964), 26.

² ↪ Florestan Fernandes, *A Revolução Burguesa no Brasil* (São Paulo: Zahar, 1975).

For example, the dictatorship defined itself as a revolution in order to try to obtain the support of vast sectors of the popular classes, which then began to fight for the “Brazilian revolution.”³

This dictatorial and military power had a double-sided nature. On one hand, it implemented an economic policy based on internationalising the Brazilian economy through privatisations and by decreeing social and labor legislation that would boost and intensify the super-exploitation of labor in Brazil. On the other hand, it implemented a military state of exception whose main goal was to defeat popular organisation (factory workers, rural workers, formal and informal workers, students, and so on) that had been growing significantly in the previous years. Over twenty years of resistance later, the army began a movement of political transition, transferring power to civilians, but ensuring military authority in order to secure the bourgeoisie’s primary interests.

Finally, in 1989, the first direct presidential election took place since the end of the dictatorship. At the beginning of the 1990s, neoliberalism effectively began to be introduced in Brazil with the electoral victory of Collor de Mello (1990–92), a sort of unqualified civilian semi-bonaparte. Its main consequences—which, it should be noted, occur in all countries in which this nefarious pragmatic ideology is installed—were: the increased hegemony of financial capital, the rise in profits and gains for capital, the significant expansion of privatisation of state-owned companies, and the near total dismantling of workers’ rights and regulations. All of this resulted in a significant increase in the concentration of wealth in the country, especially during the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994–2002), since Collor was impeached in 1992.

In the 1990s, Brazil lived through a process I have called neoliberal desertification. Its state-owned productive sectors

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were heavily privatised, workers’ rights legislation was gradually deregulated, and the financial sector was monopolised, enormously expanding the hegemony of Cardoso’s government in the steering of economic policies.⁴ Not only was anticapitalist opposition gradually deconstructed, but so was reformism (which had emerged especially during João Goulart’s government between 1961

and 1964), which had been defending agricultural, urban, and tax reforms that were eliminated, little by little, from the Brazilian political scene. In this way, neoliberalism was consolidated in Cardoso’s two terms.

The Workers’ Party in Government and Its Conciliatory Politics (between Irreconcilable Social Reifications)

In 2002, all signs pointed toward Brazil changing its path. But when the Workers’ Party (PT) won the presidency in 2002, electing its main metalworker-union leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (“Lula”), it was no longer the party it had once been. Transformism, a concept richly developed by Antonio Gramsci in *The Prison Notebooks*, had already hit what had been the strongest feature of the party: its popular and working-class social origins.⁵

³ ↩ Caio Prado Jr., *A Revolução Brasileira* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1966).

⁴ ↩ In this article, I have widely used various ideas developed in my book *O Privilégio da Servidão* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2018) and in my recent interview in “*The Long Brazilian Crisis: A Forum*,” *Historical Materialism*, January 22, 2019.

⁵ ↩ Antonio Gramsci, *Maquiavel, a Política e o Estado Moderno* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1968).

PT abandoned the concept of being a party of the working class that defended its class autonomy and political independence, it converted into a party “for all,” without challenging the status quo.

Molecularly, almost imperceptibly (except to their critics from the left), the PT abandoned the concept of being a party of the working class that defended its class autonomy and political independence. Instead, it converted itself into a party “for all,” “able to take power” without challenging the

status quo. Guided more and more by elections, distanced from the struggles of the working class, the party slowly deserted, in its central leadership and policy-defining centres, any anticapitalist and socialist aspirations. These were restricted to smaller Marxist groupings that existed within the PT and that, however, did not find any effective possibility of defining and steering the actions of the party. Thus, one of the most important workers’ parties in the Western world, which had sparked so much hope in the Brazilian working class, metamorphosed and ended up a Party of Order.⁶

This complex mutation was the founding cause of the policies developed by the PT during the governments of Lula (2003–11) and Dilma Rousseff, known simply as Dilma (2011–16). But at their root, their actions were characterised much more by continuation, rather than rupture, with neoliberalism.

What can then explain the enormous success of Lula’s government?

This success, especially reaped during Lula’s second term as president (2007–11), was a result of significant economic growth, particularly the expansion of the country’s internal market. His economic policies created great incentives for the production of commodities for export, such as iron, ethanol, and soy, and granted huge incentives to industries by reducing taxation in the production of automobiles, household appliances, and civil construction, as well as “judiciously” preserving the primary surplus that was chiefly beneficial to financial capital. It was not without reason that Lula repeatedly remarked that “bankers had never profited as much as they did during my government.” He was right to say that.

There was, however, a subtle difference in relation to neoliberalism. To the aforementioned macroeconomic neoliberal

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elements, he added focused social policies that benefited the poorer sectors of the Brazilian population. Lula’s family welfare program *Bolsa Família* was the biggest expression of this policy and became the most successful component of his government. It was

a large-spectrum welfare act that minimised (but did not eliminate) the high levels of poverty, especially in the poorest regions of the country. The structural pillars of Brazilian misery, unfortunately, were hardly faced or addressed.⁷

Compared to Cardoso, Lula implemented a wage-valorisation policy, particularly with regard to the minimum wage. The state, aside from ensuring, preserving, and expanding the interests of large bourgeois sectors, also took on the role of economic incentiviser and of expanding social policies, which led to the creation of more than twenty million jobs in a little over a decade. Thus, I have characterised Lula’s government as social liberal, to show its nuanced differences with traditional neoliberalism.

With Lula as a kind of great benefactor, his government was considered very successful as a result of its implementing cross-class politics, following its main guiding thread: the politics of class conciliation. At the same time that the interests

⁶ ↪ Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire.

⁷ ↪ Antunes, O Privilégio da Servidão.

Lula was adored by the majority of Brazilians.

and profits of the dominant bourgeois sectors were preserved and expanded, Lula's government also favoured the more impoverished sectors of the Brazilian working class, especially those living in the country's northeast region.

This was how Lula became, for the bourgeoisie, an authentic leader, a kind of bonaparte (in the sense given by Karl Marx). He rigorously fulfilled his commitments to the ruling classes, doing whatever was possible to increase their already high accumulation of capital, ensuring thus the widespread support of the bourgeoisie.⁸ The support of the working classes had already been guaranteed since the 1970s. By the end of his government, Lula was adored by the majority of Brazilians. And the conservative middle classes and bourgeois fractions had to bow to his political genius.

In 2010, ending his government with high approval ratings from the vast majority of the population, Lula chose Dilma as his successor. This was one of the biggest political mistakes of one of the most important working-class leaders in Brazilian history. As in the spectacular tragedy of Frankenstein, the creator was disappointed in his creation. Instead of carrying out Lula's proposals, Dilma had her own plans, which only became clear later.

During both her terms (2011–15), Dilma maintained the same economic principles as Lula.⁹ And as the global economy had been favorable to the PT's government, Brazil rose as a triumphant experiment lauded by global finance, receiving positive support from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other similar organs.

However, as the structural crisis of capital brought along a new collapse of the global economy, the PT's government project began its via crucis. As it is known, this new critical phase first hit the capitalist nations of the North (2008) and arrived in Brazil later (2014).¹⁰

The June 2013 uprisings were the first signs that the situation was rapidly changing. They marked, during a special moment in the global backdrop, the enormity of the population's discontent with corruption and the millions in public spending going toward megaprojects for the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) Confederations Cup, the World Cup, and the Olympics. Celebrated by the PT as a "great act" of the Lula government, the impoverished population was outraged with the enormous amount of spending required by FIFA while there was a supposed lack of public funds for social services and infrastructure, particularly public transportation, health care, and education. At the same time, accusations of corruption against the PT government, which had taken a huge blow in 2005 with the Mensalão scandal in the state-owned Petrobras that almost led to Lula's deposition at the end of his first term as president, were intensifying.¹¹

In this context, the June 2013 uprisings began in São Paulo, the biggest city in Brazil. A huge popular mass took to the streets, forming spontaneous rallies, using plebiscitary practices, and showing their outrage toward forms of representation in parliament, as well as in state and federal governments and the judiciary.

⁸ ↪ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

⁹ ↪ Only during a brief period did Dilma seek to slightly reduce bank interest rates. The resistance was so fierce that she quickly backtracked.

¹⁰ ↪ See István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); François Chesnais, *A Mundialização do Capital* (São Paulo: Xamã, 1996); and Robert Kurz, *O Colapso da Modernização* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1992).

¹¹ ↪ *Mensalão* is a reference to the systemic and almost monthly corruption that took funds from Petrobras to pay parties allied with the PT in order for them to continue supporting the government, as well as the funds that went to the PT itself.

Little by little, the uprisings awakened the rage in the traditional middle class and vast sectors of the bourgeoisie, which then blamed the PT and its corruption for Brazil's amassed evils. The support from television, newspapers, radios, and the media as a whole was decisive for the expansion of the multifaceted and cross-class characteristic of the uprisings. They increasingly acquired new ideological components, including right-wing political slogans against the PT and the "red" left, and calls for the return of the military dictatorship, a common proposal from conservative middle classes and vast sectors of the bourgeoisie, who, now discontented with the intensification of the economic crisis, began openly dissenting against Dilma's government.

The political consequences were significant, marked by the rapid politicisation and ideologisation of the right and, in particular, of the far right. What is most surprising is that they were able to appropriate anti-institutional, anti-parliamentary, and even anti-systemic components and give them a new ultraconservative meaning.

This critical framework intensified with the presidential elections of 2014, when various sectors and fractions of the ruling class that had until then supported the PT governments changed sides, demanding harsher fiscal adjustments and imposing measures to combat alleged terrorism that were broadly condemned as endangering basic human rights.

In this context of open confrontation and the advance of the right, in 2014 Dilma was reelected for what should have been her second term. But, even though her first acts after reelection advanced in the direction imposed by bourgeois forces, opposition to her new government continued to grow.

Dilma made harsher fiscal adjustments; reduced workers' rights, such as unemployment welfare; increased bank interest rates, naming a new representative straight from the financial capital to implement a "new" austerity program; announced new privatisation programs, and so on. But still the discontentment grew. By implementing these unpopular measures, her government saw the collapse of the support of the working classes, unions, and social movements that had, until then, sustained the PT governments.¹²

It was evident, then, that the bourgeois classes, unable to present a neoliberal regressive program that could lead to electoral victory, turned to a coup.

The final blow came with the announcement of Operação Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash), a judicial investigation that was almost exclusively dedicated to punishing crimes of corruption committed by the PT, which increased the party's and Dilma's unpopularity even further. It was evident, then, that the bourgeois classes, unable to present a neoliberal regressive program that could lead to electoral victory, turned to a coup. After months of political, parliamentary, judicial, and media clashes, Dilma's impeachment was only a matter of time.

The PT government was demoralised, involved in huge corruption scandals, and the country's unemployment levels were rising. The moment for the dominant groups to unleash the coup had arrived. The political locus chosen to give the appearance of legality was parliament, which had, until recently, given its solid support to the PT governments.

A new modality of coup—already tested in Honduras and Paraguay, not to mention non-Latin American examples—began to consolidate itself in the region. In August 2016, through an elaborate process of judicialisation of politics that was, simultaneously, a form of politicisation of justice, parliament validated Dilma's impeachment and her replacement by Michel Temer, her vice president appointed by Lula. The long cycle of PT governments was over.

¹² ↪ An example of this loss can be seen in the industrial belt in which Lula and the PT have their origins. In the 2014 presidential elections, Dilma lost in these working-class cities to the right-wing candidate Aécio Neves.

The time had arrived for the capitalists to have an openly gendarmist type of government, regardless of how useful the PT governments had been for the ruling classes. Brazil definitely left the glorious era of conciliation and entered the fatal phase of counterrevolution. The Brazilian political context gave plausibility to Giorgio Agamben's formulation, in which the state of exception becomes a permanent characteristic of the state.¹³ What we saw in Brazil with the 2016 coup is a new aberrant variant of what we have characterised as a state with the right of exception.

The parliamentary coup that led to Dilma's impeachment did not present adequate judicial proof to compromise her. It was a political deposition. But, contradictorily, Dilma was not punished by losing her political rights, which should have been the judicial consequence of her deposition. The stark judicial inconsistency made itself flagrantly evident.

In other words, the parliament that deposed her recognised that she had not committed any political crime that would justify her future ineligibility. The farce was added to the tragedy, in a country that hides its profound problems and social inequalities by taking on the appearance of an endless comedy.

One is inevitably reminded of Marx referring to the French parliament of the Second Republic. In the face of the humiliation of power suffered by the institution, they saw the last remnant of respect enjoyed by the parliament among the French population fade away.¹⁴ What can be said, then, of the Brazilian parliament, whose political pragmatism was considered by the population as the most nefarious in all of Brazil's republican history?

The election of the former army captain in 2018 was the tragic closure to the process that began with the 2016 coup. Once again, Brazil submitted to the negligible and nefarious.

The Brief Interregnum of (Insignificant) Temer

Temer was appointed with a clear mission to devastate the country as quickly as possible. At the end of the PT's period of class conciliation, the new phase of preemptive counterrevolution began—one that takes place when there is no risk of revolution, but seeks only to expand the forms of domination. It incorporated an extreme neoliberal pragmatic ideology, meaning, in this context, that it aimed to:

- (1) Privatize what was left of the main state-owned companies;
- (2) Expand the dominant interests under the hegemony of financial capital;
- (3) Approve the utter demolition of workers' rights.

Temer sought to eliminate the regulation that prohibits slave labor in Brazil... he was able to attack workers' rights by approving that negotiations between employers and employees can take precedence over the law. He implemented the flexibilisation of work relations and fully embedded the subcontracting mechanism in them, amply expanding the occurrence of intermittent work.

These measures were in tune with the backdrop of the global preemptive counterrevolution, under the hegemony of financial capital, that began in the 1970s, after the struggles of 1968, and intensified after the 2008 crisis. Presently, the counterrevolution advances without limits at its most destructive. As István Mészáros affirmed, the system of capital's metabolism can only expand within a framework of a general declining trend.¹⁵

¹³ ↪ Giorgio Agamben, *Estado de Exceção* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2004).

¹⁴ ↪ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

¹⁵ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*.

Some of the first measures taken by Temer highlight this destruction. Initially, he sought to eliminate (unsuccessfully) the regulation that prohibits slave labor in Brazil, a profoundly antisocial measure that resulted in general disgust. However, Temer was able to attack workers' rights by approving a high-profile labor (counter)reform. It established the principle that negotiations between employers and employees can take precedence over the law, collapsing a large part of the protective labor legislation achieved over the course of many struggles.

He implemented the flexibilisation of work relations and fully embedded the subcontracting mechanism in them, amply expanding the occurrence of intermittent work. The main objective of these destructive measures was to eliminate the 1943 Consolidation of Labor Laws, imposing the will of Brazilian businesses (especially the National Confederation of Industry, the Brazilian Federation of Banks, and other similar entities), implanting what I have called the "society of total subcontracting of labor in Brazil."¹⁶

That was former vice president Temer's brief, but disastrous, interregnum amid an endless succession of corruption scandals that hit at the heart of his government and, in particular, his own image. He was described by the Public Prosecutor's Office as the "head of the gang." His government took no measures that sought to reduce the extremely high bank interest rates and profits; in fact, no such taxation was even mentioned. The preemptive counterrevolution, extreme neoliberalism, and financial hegemony make up the destructive tripod that commands global capitalism and was followed by Temer. New elections were held in October 2018 and the far right, in its proto-fascist and neofascist expressions, crawled out from under its rocks.

The 2018 Elections: The Reorganisation of the Far Right and Bolsonaro's Victory

There have not been such furiously competitive elections since the military dictatorship. It may be that the 2018 elections share some similarities with the 1989 elections, when Collor, an aberrant semibonapartist variant, made himself out to be the only alternative for the ruling classes to defeat Lula, who was running for president for the first time.

Almost thirty years later, Jair Bolsonaro took on the role of supposed underdog and, in the face of the collapse of the other center and right-wing bourgeois candidates, became the only one capable of countering the risk of the "PT and the reds' victory." The captain, as he is frequently called by his acolytes, is a sort of Donald Trump of the periphery—a second-rate Trump. Though he appears to be the most radical critic of the system, Bolsonaro is, in fact, the very image of the status quo, in all its brutality and rawness.

Additionally, his bid for the presidency found its ideal moment in the international scenery: Trump in the United States, Brexit in the United Kingdom, neo-Nazism in Germany, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Matteo Salvini, the all-powerful neofascist minister, in Italy. The list of aberrations perpetuated by the right around the world is extensive.

In Latin America, the examples also pile up: Mauricio Macri in Argentina is the biggest example of neoliberal devastation. Sebastián Piñera in Chile and Iván Duque Márquez in Colombia are agents of the United States and its

¹⁶ ↩ Antunes, O Privilégio da Servidão.

aggressive imperial politics. In many countries, the far right, emboldened by Trump's electoral victory, became the so-called best option to ensure the interests behind the aforementioned destructive tripod.

We are then entering a new cycle of counterrevolution that refuses any form of conciliation. As a metaphor, it can be said that platform capitalism, the capitalism of the digital, information, and financial era, has some similarities with early forms of capitalism. The primitive accumulation of capital, as it is known, was based on the intense exploitation and pillaging of the colonial world. Currently, the working class in Hungary is fighting against the Slavery Law. There seems to be something in common between the capitalism of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and the capitalism of the twenty-first century.

In this profoundly adverse context, caused by a structural crisis of the system of capital in its most destructive phase, the seemingly unexpected happened in Brazil as well: the center right withered and the far right proliferated.¹⁷ A political vacuum had been created and the far right saw their chance to announce loudly their exacerbated hatred for the communists, their disgust toward the poor and black, their excuses for misogyny and femicide, and their efforts to exterminate LGBT and indigenous communities. All around, they added new features to their swastikas, without abandoning their previous ones. In Latin America, with Augusto Pinochet in Chile, we had already learned to rhyme military dictatorship and neoliberalism.

Acknowledging this favorable scenario, the Brazilian far right began building an alternative candidate claiming to be outside the system, opposed to everything and everyone. They began intensely broadcasting their values through social media: against corruption, against ideology, and against politics. Their main political flagship, capable of significantly expanding their electoral strength in a moment of profound crisis, can be synthesised as ending corruption, which they attributed to the PT and the left. By doing so, the far right completely altered Brazil's electoral and political course.

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Corruption is an endemic characteristic of capitalism, in effect in so many countries around the world as well as in Brazil. Since its colonisation, corruption has been a recurring practice in Brazilian history, but it intensified in its republican phase, along with the constitution and consolidation of capitalist society. Its practice is the rule rather than the exception, a consequence of the incestuous relationships between ruling classes (both native and foreign) and the high echelons of the apparatus of the state. Its appearance and expansion take place when right-wing parties are in power. In Brazil, corruption is also an inherent part of the modus operandi of the bourgeoisie that was born under the sign of the primitive accumulation of capital and has shown itself to be, throughout centuries, unable to survive without appropriating the financial resources of the res publica.

Criticism and complaints of corruption are frequently made by the bourgeoisie and its parties as a way of hiding the central characteristics of capitalism, which, in the Brazilian context, involves high rates of profit and the super-exploitation of labor. The problem, however, gained new components when the PT, which had previously been fiercely critical of corruption, began actively participating in this nefarious project, ceding ground to the popular discontent of its leadership and giving the bourgeoisie and the centrist and right-wing parties leverage to deal the final blow to the PT

¹⁷ ↩ Mészáros, Beyond Capital.

governments. The PT's electoral defeat was mainly due to this hatred, largely accentuated by the profound economic crisis rather than the image of Bolsonaro's (nonexistent) attributes and merits.

In reality, Bolsonaro was the only one who, with very little time before the election, appeared capable of defeating Lula and the PT. The bourgeoisie's first choice in the 2018 elections was the centre-right candidate of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party, which has been the party of choice of the Brazilian ruling class since 1994, when the party elected Cardoso. As Lula was still, even in prison, the most popular candidate in opinion polls, the main fractions of capital, foreseeing their defeat, switched, almost on the eve of the election, to the only candidate that could defeat Lula (or any other candidate appointed by him, namely Fernando Haddad).

The only way for the bourgeoisie to continue its program of social devastation, which began with Temer, was by supporting Bolsonaro. It was either this or the "return of the PT and the reds." For this to work, the ruling classes had one demand. Since they knew Bolsonaro was completely unprepared and subjectively unhinged as a candidate, they had to impose a severely neoliberal economic team that would ensure the economic program demanded by the dominant bourgeois sectors. They turned to Paulo Guedes (a faithful University of Chicago alumnus and professor at the University of Chile under Pinochet), who offered an ultra-orthodox economic program, savagely seeking privatisation, as imposed by big bankers and industry heads, helping to assure that Bolsonaro would not renew his past proposal, which he had feverishly defended, of making companies state owned.

The fact that Bolsonaro defended hyper-conservative and proto-fascist values was easily assimilated by the Brazilian bourgeoisie, which had never held any democratic ideals.

Furthermore, this "new" candidate could count on the support of vast sectors of the armed forces to guarantee political stability for the ruling classes. Due to this, there had to be someone on the presidential team who had the direct support of the army, a problem solved by Bolsonaro's choice for vice president, General Antônio Hamilton Martins Mourão.

The political engineering had been drawn out: Bolsonaro was a candidate of military origin, profoundly inspired by the dictatorship, who counted on the significant rising support of the popular classes that had, until then, supported the PT governments. On top of unemployment, loss of rights, and lack of social perspective, people witnessed the PT, in which they had placed so much hope since its foundation in 1980, submerged in an enormous crisis of corruption. The bourgeois classes then found the possibility of a victory, now with the support of the masses.

For a better understanding of the Brazilian bourgeoisie, one is reminded of an analytical approach adopted by Georg

capitalism in Brazil has always been structured around the super-exploitation of labor, in such a way as to ensure that a parcel of surplus value is extracted for the local-national bourgeoisie, and another fat parcel is drained away by the imperial bourgeoisie of the center of the capitalist system.

Lukács who, alongside Gramsci, was one of the most important Marxist philosophers of the twentieth century. Here, his characterisation of the Prussian way, conceived in order to better understand the German bourgeoisie and the path it had taken for the consolidation of capitalism in that country, is particularly useful. The agrarian sectors of Prussian origin, in its transition to industrialisation, proved

capable of supporting themselves by autocratic and dictatorial means of power (as can be observed during the Otto von Bismarck era and the Nazi aberration). This Lukácsian characterisation of the Prussian way (similar, too, to the

Gramscian formulation of the passive revolution) has great analytical value when considering other bourgeoisies of late capitalism, such as the Italian, Russian, and Japanese.¹⁸

In the Brazilian case, where the bourgeoisie has its origins in slavery and colonialism, its “Prussian” character is twofold: virulent and autocratic in relation to the popular classes, and servile, subordinate, and dependent in relation to the central bourgeoisie. That is the central cause of the antidemocratic direction of the Brazilian bourgeoisie, always ready to support dictatorial regimes of any kind.

It is for this and no other reason that capitalism in Brazil has always been structured around the super-exploitation of labor, in such a way as to ensure that a parcel of surplus value is extracted for the local-national bourgeoisie, and another fat parcel is drained away by the imperial bourgeoisie of the center of the capitalist system. Thus, while in the countries that followed the traditional Prussian way the industrial bourgeoisie established itself autonomously, in the Latin American continent it was born subordinate to and dependent on the metropolis. It has always developed through the intensification of the exploitation of labor, initially slave and later salaried, using mechanisms that exponentially intensify both the extraction of relative and absolute surplus value.

Hence, a particular type of Prussian and dependent capitalism developed in Brazil. Its agrarian origins were transformed, at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of twentieth centuries, into a system in which a dominant industrial bourgeoisie existed nonetheless in a subordinate position in relation to the monopolist and imperialist centres (the United States and Europe). Brazil’s capitalism is external, economically integrated, and internally socially disintegrated, in which the bourgeoisie had assured its dominance by always turning to autocratic and dictatorial governments. In its republican history, Brazil has lived few moments in which it could be defined as effectively democratic even by bourgeois standards.

Therefore, supporting Bolsonaro was not a difficult decision for the Brazilian ruling classes. For one thing, some years ago, he converted to neo-Pentecostalism (also known as the neo-charismatic movement) from Catholicism. This was done precisely to secure the vocal support of Evangelical Christians with their prosperity theology, who, in their majority, are characterised by their reactionary gender ideology and their uncompromising defence of so-called family values.

During his almost thirty years as a congressman, Bolsonaro’s public speeches and rallies have continually been tinged with disparaging comments about oppressed groups, such as black people, women, and LGBT people, as well as with unyielding defences of the military dictatorship and its practices of torture, among other elements of far-right ideology in Brazil.

However, there was always a missing element of historical contingency, an episodic development that could transform the former captain into the main candidate for all of the right and significant sections of the center. This occurred when Bolsonaro suffered an attempt on his life a few weeks before the first round of elections.

Making use of the enormous support of the Evangelical community (with its thousands of radio stations, television channels, and followers), Bolsonaro was exalted through social media, with its monumental ability to create fake news, and boosted by international mafias that have become well known since Trump’s election. All of this greatly weaponised

¹⁸ ↪ Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought* (London: New Left Books, 1970).

the image of the messianic candidate, a true saviour of the nation. A strong victimisation campaign increased his popularity even more and, finally, transformed him into the only one capable of stopping the PT from winning.

Due to the attempt on his life, his campaign team was able to justify his absence in practically all public electoral

Bolsonaro has similarities with Orbán and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, while taking inspiration from Trump... his ministries are of the medieval kind, to say the least.

debates, allowing his silence to become another decisive triumph. The less he said, the smaller the chance to show his ignorance on all topics vital to the country. And, as if this were not enough, due to this circumstantial fact, Bolsonaro became the candidate who appeared the most in the media as a whole,

which reported on his health at all times, always emphasising his strength and resilience. At last, the scene was set for the electoral victory of the far right and its proto-fascist candidate.

Epilogue: The Future of Bolsonaro's Government and the Left

As I have recently indicated in "The Long Brazilian Crisis," in which I first presented my analysis of the Brazilian crisis, Bolsonaro has similarities with Orbán and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, while taking inspiration from Trump, too.¹⁹ His election, in fact, strongly benefited from the victory of the far right and Trumpism in the United States. Bolsonaro's main characteristics are his irrationality, volatility, and lack of control. Additionally, the legend, as he is known by his followers, has clear proto-fascist components.

His choices for ministers are the most outrageous in all of Brazil's republican history. From the start, a clear majority of Bolsonaro's ministers have come from the army, most of whom had already been part of the military reserve force. All signs indicate that this was a demand made by generals in exchange for support. No one knows Bolsonaro's unpredictability better than the military, since he was expelled from the army in his youth for trying to begin a rebellion in the barracks.

Significantly, Bolsonaro turned to Guedes as his economic minister and, for Minister of Justice and Public Security, to former judge Sergio Moro, who was responsible for Operation Car Wash that led to the political conviction (without evidence) of Lula and whose judicial praxis is clearly not informed by neutrality.

Bolsonaro found most of his civilian ministers in his Social Liberal Party (PSL), an inexperienced right-wing party with

The left was unable to understand the significance of the rebellions of 2013, with their strong anti-systemic components. In moments of crisis, the only thing that was not on its mind was finding an alternative, with a horizon beyond capital.

many leaders currently accused of corruption, especially regarding the elections. The unifying characteristics of the PSL are its ultraconservatism and its religious neo-Pentecostalism. As expected, the disputes and disagreements have already begun to intensify and have been responsible for repeated political crises in the Bolsonaro administration. On top of that, the media has been exposing profound corruption in Bolsonaro's own family from the

day he took office.

The rest of his ministries are of the medieval kind, to say the least. According to many current ministers' recent declarations, there is frequent disgust evinced toward the LGBT movement, neglect of indigenous communities, and, as

¹⁹ ↩ "The Long Brazilian Crisis: A Forum."

if that were not enough, clear opposition to any protection and preservation of nature, particularly the Amazon. Bolsonaro's ministries represent the interests of agribusiness, along with various other reactionary elements that have gained clout in the new political regime.

There have been innumerable times in which Bolsonaro and some of his ministers have mocked the environmental movement, making light of the actions and struggles for the preservation of nature. But after a dam owned by the mining company Vale broke in Brumadinho, a municipality in the state of Minas Gerais, the government was forced to make, at least rhetorically, an urgent reversal and defend the importance of environmentalism, which they had expressly disdained during the campaign and their first days in government. The tragedy caused the deaths of over three hundred Brazilians, among them workers, locals, and people from neighbouring areas, as well as irreversible environmental destruction. This happened in the same way as the Mariana dam disaster did in 2015, which deeply shook the Dilma government. This new tragedy unmasked the Bolsonaro government and forced it to backtrack on its explicit anti-environmentalist politics.

In short, Bolsonaro's first two months in government were disastrous in all ways. His appearance at the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos was typical. Although he had been scheduled to speak for over forty minutes, the captain spoke only for a few minutes and said absolutely nothing of relevance. His presence was the subject of ridicule by other grand personalities and masters of the universe in Davos, responsible in great part for the current global imbalance and devastation, arrogantly flaunting their airs of so-called culture and civility.

At the time of writing, in March 2019, unpredictability is the only certainty in relation to the future of Bolsonaro's government. There are no doubts that he is a regressive, far-right conservative. Whether his proposals will or will not be implemented depends on the resistance of social, feminist, youth, black, indigenous, environmental, and labor movements, the anticapitalist left-wing parties, and other forces that could effectively oppose Bolsonaro's actions while he is in office. And, at the moment, it is not far-fetched to entertain the possibility that his government (or lack thereof) may have a short life. The increase of military representatives in his ministries is a precaution imposed by the armed forces in the face of this risk. It is prudent to remember that, in less than twenty years, Brazil lived through two impeachments—Collor's and Dilma's.

One last observation: The left has been noisily defeated, not only in the October 2018 elections, but in its main

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experiment of the PT governments. The left is now forced to reinvent itself. In its dominant centres, it was unable to understand the significance of the rebellions of June 2013, with their strong antiestablishment and anti-systemic components. In moments of crisis, the only thing that was not on its mind was finding an alternative, with a horizon beyond capital.

Therefore, the left now faces the challenge of comprehending this last period of Brazilian history. The times require that popular forces restructure themselves together in order to resist and confront the government's autocratic, dictatorial, and proto-fascist actions. The failed experiment of the PT, which had always sought class conciliation and never prepared itself for confrontation, must never be repeated.

The issues that must be faced now are many.

If we are on the side of reason and revolution, an indispensable beginning is to ascertain what are the vital questions of our time if we want to walk together, in solidarity, toward a new, emancipated way of life.

Will the left be capable of radically altering the political course it is currently on, which is mostly relegated to institutions and elections? Will it continue to repeat its cross-class political alliances, seen as indispensable for obtaining electoral victories, but that do not ensure any substantial changes? Will it be able to reinvent itself and offer a new kind of alternative, one capable of deconstructing the institutionalism that is dominant today, which atomises the working class, the social

movements, and the struggles on the margins/peripheries? Will it be capable of articulating a new anticapitalist project, based on concrete and daily experiences, a new social and collective way of life, of which the working class, in its multifaceted design and morphology, is a fundamental part?

If, throughout the twentieth century, the epicentre of the left's actions was institutional and parliamentary action (following what Mészáros suggestively and critically denominated the path of least resistance), the biggest challenge in this period will be found elsewhere, somewhere different from that which has dominated and exhausted the left until now.²⁰ It is imperative to reforge the organic ties between the labor and social movements, with their mosaic of multiple tools and without previous hierarchical structures, taking as a starting point the concrete actions of the working class.

If the social movements find their strength and vitality in the bonds that tie them to daily life, we have an important starting point. However, due to their specificity, these social movements, in Brazil as well as in other countries, end up facing many hardships when trying to envision a social project that goes beyond capital.

The unions, in their own right, also frequently find themselves prisoners to the more immediate interests of the working class, which limits and sometimes impedes the apprehension of social totality and, in particular, progress in the sense of class belonging, which is fundamental given the enormous fragmentation of social life and the unlimited means of manipulation by capital in the current world.

Finally, the left parties have generically elaborated their socialist and anticapitalist projects, but frequently find themselves distanced from the class that relies on work in its daily life.²¹ They design their theoretical projects, but, being detached from daily life, do not find a social base capable of sustaining and driving their projects forward.

If we are on the side of reason and revolution, we must articulate these three tools—movements, unions, and parties—created by the working class since the Paris Commune and that have become more fragile over the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. It is possible to find a starting point in this direction that will, simultaneously, meet the necessary radicalism and organicism.

An indispensable beginning is to ascertain, in a Lukácsian way, what are the vital questions of our time if we want to walk together, in solidarity, toward a new, emancipated way of life.

²⁰ ↩ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*.

²¹ ↩ Ricardo Antunes, *The Meanings of Work* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013).

The Preemptive Counterrevolution and the Rise of the Far Right in Brazil

True Democracy and Capitalism

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