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A CHRONICLE
OF BRAZIL'S
CONSERVATIVE
TURN

EDITED BY
KATERINA HATZIKIDI &
EDUARDO DULLO

A Horizon of
(Im)possibilities

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A Chronicle of Brazil's Conservative Turn

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Introduction: Brazil's conservative return

Katerina Hatzikidi and Eduardo Dullo

The 2018 presidential election result in Brazil surprised many. Since then, numerous debates and a growing body of texts have attempted to understand this result and unearth the seeds that sowed what was understood by different analysts as the country's 'conservative turn'. In this introduction, we will not elaborate on all the factors that constitute or contribute to this conservative turn; instead, after briefly sketching out key insights from recent studies on Brazil's political and social transformations before and after the 2018 election, we focus on some relevant issues which we consider helpful in comprehending the historical moment of Bolsonaro's ascendance to power. Alongside important disruptions, we place emphasis on continuities in relation to the country's authoritarian tradition, an aspect which has been significantly overlooked in academic debates. In this sense, we argue that Brazil did not experience a sudden conservative turn, but rather a 'conservative return'. In doing so, we stress the particularity of Brazil's transformation in relation to an authoritarian and far-right rise at the global level, often with distinctly populist characteristics, while acknowledging their common ground. Finally, we briefly introduce each chapter in turn, discussing how their interdisciplinary perspectives allow us to approach the complex conditions in place from different, and often complementary, analytical angles.

An extraordinary election

A great number of analyses have focused on the factors that brought Jair Bolsonaro to power, and as the first mandate of his presidency is still unfolding, there will certainly be many more. In their discussion, Wendy Hunter and Timothy Power suggested that the 'meteoric rise' of Bolsonaro was made possible by 'a combination of fundamental background conditions' (such as economic recession, corruption and crime), political contingencies (especially the weakness of rival candidates) and 'a shakeup in campaign dynamics produced by the strategic use of social media' (Hunter and Power, 2019, p. 70). Many emphasised endogenous factors that purportedly determined Brazilians' voting behaviour, such as the effects of economic and political events on people's 'conservative subjectivity' (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2020) and a collective yearning for change and security (Singer and Venturi, 2019). While

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some regarded the political climate that led to the election as conjunctural and possibly temporary, others tied it to larger socio-political processes and a chronic ‘pendular movement’ (Avritzer, 2018) between democratic and anti-democratic political structures and forces in Brazil. Some underlined cultural and moral aspects behind voters’ support for Bolsonaro (e.g. Almeida, 2019) and the seismic effect of major corruption scandals that first broke out in 2005 (i.e. the so-called Mensalão, referring to the monthly allowance paid to deputies for loyal voting, which profoundly shook the first Workers’ Party government: see e.g. Bethell, 2018, p. 216) and were further unveiled through the Lava Jato (Car Wash) investigation. Indeed, such was the avalanche of Car Wash-related developments – which culminated in the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff on charges of violating federal budgetary laws in 2016 and in the imprisonment of several prominent politicians, among them former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva – in the years preceding the 2018 election that, for some analysts, ‘the histrionics over Brexit’ and ‘the conniptions over Trump in America are close to much ado about nothing’, as Perry Anderson (2019) emphatically suggested.

In the current ‘post-shame’ political era, in the formulation of Ruth Wodak (2019), several ‘anti’ factors – such as anti-establishment, anti-party politics, and anti-leftism – gain traction and shape the populist rhetorics of division that transform political adversaries into enemies to be annihilated. Hunter and Power (2019) suggested that Bolsonaro was the only presidential candidate to be ‘on the right side’ of both ‘major cleavages’ in the Brazilian electorate that determined the 2018 elections, namely the ‘anti-establishment’ and the ‘anti-PT’ (PT is the Workers’ Party) cleavages. While Lula might have been able to successfully appeal to his broad base and win the election had he been an eligible candidate, his party garnered passionate disapproval.

In André Singer’s now classic formulation of ‘*lulismo*’, a key element of its enduring appeal is the simultaneous diminution of inequality and maintenance of the established order (Singer, 2009, p. 84). While policies implemented by the PT governments improved living conditions for Brazil’s poorest, they did not significantly shake systemic structures and unequal power dynamics. This compromise, far from being a major factor in voters’ dissatisfaction, struck a balance between a desire to maintain ‘order’ on the one hand, and to address social and economic inequality on the other, appeasing fears that revolutionary politics generate and satisfying groups across the political spectrum.

The political disenchantment of many fed off the unfolding Car Wash investigations, issues of public safety and violence and the growing economic crisis. Identified with major corruption scandals and treated as the incumbent party even though it was no longer in power, the PT was largely blamed for all that was going wrong in the country and was therefore ‘punished’ in the 2018 election. As Hunter and Power (2019, p. 80) succinctly put it: ‘When

the electoral options were narrowed to Bolsonaro and a *petista* whose name was not Lula, Bolsonaro won by a landslide.'

It is worth noting that the profusion of post-fact explanations, aiming to make sense of the sudden rise and victory of the far-right candidate, followed a scanty academic interest in taking Bolsonaro's candidacy seriously: he was often dismissed with a laugh or taken as nonsense. Did analysts fail to perceive the transformations underway or were they unwilling to accept them? While it is of essence to probe into our own research bias and increase our ability to engage with 'multiple perspectives' in an open dialogue, even when we profoundly disagree with our interlocutors (Dullo, 2016), we must not fail to acknowledge the work of those researchers who were indeed listening to and taking seriously those people who showed indignation with the political status quo and demanded radical change. Some of those works, for example, pointed towards an increasingly heated anti-PT climate in the rallies of 2013, and especially in those from 2016 onwards (Solano, Ortellado and Moretto, 2017) while others emphasised the key role of social media in spreading disinformation on the two main candidates and the upcoming election (Malini, Ciarelli and Medeiros, 2017; Tardáguila, Benevenuto and Ortellado, 2018; Nemer, 2018). In the run-up to the presidential election, Isabela Oliveira Kalil (2018) sketched out a typology of Bolsonaro supporters, showing the diversity of his future electoral base – ranging from young gamers to LGBTQI+ people and from conservative churchgoers to university students. These early studies – most of them based on ethnographic research – not only acutely perceived and dissected what for many was the ugly face of common sense (Mazzarella, 2019) but also paved the way for future research and public debate on the fundamental social and political transformations that we have been witnessing since 2013 (see especially Zanotta Machado and Motta, 2019; Neiburg and Ribeiro Thomaz, 2020; and Hatzikidi, 2021).

Crucially, more than an electoral shift to a different candidate and political party, analysts have flagged that the rise to power of the former army captain may also present a threat to the country's democratic institutions (see e.g. Abranches et al., 2019). By electing a former member of the armed forces, who, despite having a political career spanning three decades managed to successfully present himself as a political outsider and 'anti-system' candidate, many Brazilians also manifested their willingness to make a break with politics as usual, broadly imagined as inherently corrupt. Authoritarian, far-right and 'postfascist' (Traverso, 2019) candidates around the world present themselves as the only viable alternative to ruined political traditions that existentially threaten the suffering 'silent majority'. As political scientist Zeynep Gambetti (2018) has illustrated, the idea of a break with existing practices and discourses is central to how far-right movements like to represent themselves. Bolsonaro's attempt to present himself as anti-system was further confirmed, in the eyes of his followers, when he entered into conflict with his own party and left

the Social Liberal Party (PSL) during his first year in office. Having failed to create his own political party, the president has governed most of his first term independently of party affiliation.

The president's frequent accusations levelled against the country's Supreme Court, the press and the Congress, coupled with his – and those of members of his government, as a video recording of a 22 April 2020 cabinet meeting graphically demonstrated – threats of military intervention, are seen by some as reassuring signs of the president's non-conformity to the political establishment and, by others, as worrying signs of an unmistakable attempt to dismantle democratic institutions and pluralism. Furthermore, the election of Jair Bolsonaro, and the rise of a previously insignificant far-right party (PSL), not only harmed the PT and weakened the political left more broadly, but also inflicted an important blow to the traditionally powerful centre-right parties, the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) and the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) (see also Garmany's discussion on post-PT Brazil in this volume).

Those who see in the increasing militarisation of the government (in early 2021, 92 people linked to the armed forces headed key state positions, while over six thousand military personnel occupied civil positions in the Brazilian public administration, a more than 100 per cent increase from 2016)¹ a warning about the weakening of democratic institutions are often equally concerned about the self-serving behaviour of part of the political establishment which, from early 2020 onwards, loosely joined the government's base of support in the Congress. Some of these parties were also strengthened by the results of the 2020 municipal elections and further consolidated their role as nationally important political players after the election for presidents of the Senate and the lower house in February 2021. In what follows, we will explore some of the challenges the current administration presents to the country's democracy and situate them within a broader historical perspective.

Democracy imperilled: the politics of transgression

Focusing on the way the Brazilian president and members of his government have addressed ethno-racial, religious and sexual minorities and their individual and group rights – such as women's, LGBTQI+ and indigenous rights – many (e.g. Lacerda, 2019; Rennó, 2019) have looked at Bolsonaro's ascendancy in terms of a broader – sometimes understood as global – far-right backlash against wins conquered by liberation movements since the 1960s which decidedly shook previously well-established dynamics of inequality. This international far-right wave is largely regarded as having provided fertile ground for the emergence

1 'Mais de 6 mil militares já exercem funções civis no governo federal, diz TCU', *Consultor Jurídico*, 17 July 2020, <<https://www.conjur.com.br/2020-jul-17/mil-militares-exercem-funcoes-civis-governo-federal>> (accessed 31 March 2021).

of such diverse figures as Donald Trump in the US, Viktor Orbán in Hungary after 2010 and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and of political parties such as Vox and Alternative for Germany in the European political scene.

While Bolsonaro might have been 'the identity politics candidate for white men', much like Trump was in the US (De la Torre, 2017, p. 5; see also Rocha and Medeiros, 2020), his electoral base was not exclusively composed of white men, nor of his enthusiastic core of *bolsominions*, but was strikingly diverse. It is well documented that Bolsonaro fared better among college graduates, was less popular in the Northeast than any other region in Brazil, and that he proportionally gained more votes from evangelical than from Catholic Christians (Hunter and Power, 2019, p. 77; Vital da Cunha and Evangelista, 2019; Lehmann, this volume). Overall, however, he attracted voters from all income groups, except from the poor and very poor to whom he appears to be appealing for the first time during the Covid-19 pandemic and mainly as a result of an emergency relief aid paid to unemployed and informal workers (Brum, 2020).

Almeida and Guarnieri (2020) interviewed voters who are for and against Bolsonaro, asking about their views on political regimes and democratic institutions, as well as on contentious moral issues. Their results indicated that 'Bolsonaro seems to have conquered a niche of conservative supporters regarding moral values, mobilizing people that identify themselves with the political right, support law and order policies, are critical of the PT but are not anti-systemic or specially disaffected towards democracy' (p. 155). Pointing to a shared respect for democracy and trust towards democratic institutions among the people interviewed, Almeida and Guarnieri tried to make sense of these voters' support for a candidate that 'routinely displays anti-democratic behaviour and rhetoric and jeopardizes fundamental rights' (2020, p. 155) by suggesting that 'under certain circumstances' (2020, p. 156), such as periods of perceived crises, relatively moderate voters may opt for radical candidates. What is at stake, at least since the 1990s, is a discursive dispute over the meaning of democracy, citizenship, civil society and participation (Dagnino, 2004). If we accept that divergent understandings and antagonistic projects, including authoritarian dispositions, are proper to the democratic endeavour, what Bolsonaro represents is not necessarily the destruction of democracy as a form of government – albeit the prolonged conflicts with the judiciary and legislative powers might lead to that – but rather the renewed return of a long-established authoritarian and conservative agenda. Following Dagnino (2004), we would argue that the re-democratisation project – which aimed at not only ensuring and expanding political, social and civil rights to all citizens but, more importantly, at enlarging the field of politics beyond the state and its institutions, and at transforming authoritarian practices rooted in Brazilian sociability into more equal social relations (Dagnino, 2004, p. 154)

– encountered a challenging obstacle in the dissemination of neoliberal values and rationalities by conservative and pro-authoritarian members of society.

Historian Enzo Traverso (2019) proposed the notion of ‘postfascism’ as a way to unite under a common denomination the different far-right movements that have emerged or resurfaced in recent years. Locating the term in a historical sequence while emphasising its chronological distinctiveness, Traverso suggests that postfascism is a phenomenon in transition. It ‘starts out from anti-feminism, anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia’ (2019, p. 31); but unlike classical fascism, which proposed a ‘total alternative to what looked like a decadent liberal order’, postfascism does not wish to change the system completely but to transform its institutions from within. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt’s acclaimed book *How Democracies Die* (2018) grapples with the disturbing phenomenon many modern (liberal) democracies are witnessing, namely the sidestepping or co-option of their ‘guardrails’ by democratically elected political ‘outsiders’ who threaten to erode the very political system through which they emerged to power. Such outsiders, instead of being filtered out by democracy’s gatekeepers (such as political parties) are assisted by enablers who usually think they can benefit from, ‘tame’ and ultimately get rid of the would-be authoritarian. This, however, is rarely the case. Instead, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, once in power, these ‘outsiders’ begin to ignore a series of ‘soft’ and ‘informal norms’ of democracy, which necessarily accompany laws and constitutions, inflicting potentially long-lasting blows to their countries’ democratic institutions.

The view that democratically elected governments transform democracies into authoritarian regimes by assailing democratic institutions from within is often accompanied by a critique of national and international economic elites, foreign corporations and international monetary institutions, which are often exclusively concerned about their financial interests at the expense of serious, and harmful, political, social and environmental ramifications (Carvalho, 2019; see also Sklair, this volume). The latter are either downplayed or miscalculated because electoral promises made by political ‘outsiders’ are often not taken at face value and are hence not expected to correspond to real policies after election. Frequently, however, would-be authoritarians make good their promises of radical change.

Asked about growing militarism and acts of censorship during Bolsonaro’s government in a recent interview, former president Dilma Rousseff said that ‘in the current neoliberal crisis in Brazil, a sort of contamination that erodes democracy from within is taking place, like parasitic fungi (*fungos parasitas*) invading a tree and eating it away’ (Lemos and Maciel, 2020). In a similar vein, the philosopher Marcos Nobre suggested that ‘the destruction of democracy’ is a conscious and methodically planned goal of Jair Bolsonaro, and that launching himself as an ‘anti-system’ or ‘anti-establishment’ candidate

was precisely a promise to confront and dismantle what he painted as corrupt (Nobre, 2019, 2020).

It is important to note that once an illiberal or anti-democratic government is in power, the distance between the gradual erosion of democratic institutions and the imposition of an authoritarian regime may be rather narrow. For example, after Jair Bolsonaro's endorsement of nationwide protests designed to cow the press, the judiciary and the legislative body in early 2020, his son and congressman, Eduardo Bolsonaro, spoke publicly of an imminent democratic 'rupture' which he saw as inevitable. Indeed, while many feared a Fujimori-style 'self-coup' was underway, the Brazilian president came close to actually ordering the shutting down of the national Congress and the Supreme Court in May 2020 (Gugliano, 2020).

While discontinuities and disruptions with liberal democratic practices need to be carefully considered, continuities also deserve our attention. Gambetti (2018, p. 2) suggests that if we construe the alt-right as 'a specific mode of repoliticization in an age of neoliberal depoliticization, but one that exacerbates the problems plaguing political systems instead of effectively overcoming them', then such reactionary political forces are not much of an alternative to liberal practices already in place. As an example, Gambetti discusses the sacrificing of 'small debtors for the sake of big ones on grounds that prosperity of the population depended on the wellbeing of corporations' (2018, p. 2). Many commentators have maintained that we cannot consider Bolsonaro's ascent to power without tying his rise to a victorious conservative movement that emerged from the 2013 street demonstrations and largely occupied the vacuum created by the political crisis, obtaining real gains from the fragmentation of the left and establishment parties (Goldstein, 2019, p. 250; see also Bethell, 2018). At the same time, however, the governments of Lula and Dilma were, at best, ambivalent in their relationship with neoliberal policies and rationality. As Singer (2012) pointed out, there was a continuity with Cardoso's neoliberal policies during the PT's first years in power. Indeed, Saad-Filho (2020) offers a reconceptualisation of the particular varieties of neoliberalism in the PT governments: 'inclusive' (2003–6) and 'developmental' (2006–13). Since Rousseff's removal from power in 2016, Saad-Filho (2020) has observed a turn to 'authoritarian neoliberalism'.

Temer's interim presidency revoked labour rights and disciplined unions, marking a clear break with the PT administrations (see Garmany, this volume). In this sense, it became 'the biggest threat to the national-state-based model' initiated in the Vargas periods and strengthened in the Lula administrations (Goldstein, 2019, p. 253). Yet the conservative pact (Singer, 2012) of *lulismo* could also be seen as part of the neoliberal depoliticisation, or rather, as a particular manner of conducting politics: coalition presidentialism. As Nobre (2013) has notably argued, the formation of coalitions and the need for wide support from parties across the political spectrum have been a defining

element of Brazilian democracy since the first years of re-democratisation. The constitution of the 'Centrão', a large self-serving cluster of right and centre-right parties known for negotiating its support of any incumbent government – independently of its political orientation – in exchange for strategic positions and financial gains, has been characterised by Nobre (2013) as a distinctive political strategy against strong polarisation. In this sense, the rising New Right with its anti-PT conviction presented itself, at the same time, as neoliberal and anti-systemic repoliticisation.

As we have witnessed during the first couple of years of Bolsonaro's administration, however, the proclaimed break with the corrupt '*velha política*' (lit. 'old politics') did not materialise. Not only is the Bolsonaro family currently being investigated in a money-laundering scheme but the government also has several more ministries and staff members than promised, and the president was quick to enter into agreement with members of the Centrão in an attempt to strengthen his political alliances in the parliament and shield himself from a potential impeachment process. Contradicting his electoral promises, the Bolsonaro administration is far from breaking with the 'old ways' of doing politics and rather affirms, at least as far as negotiations with the Centrão are concerned, the 'politics as usual' tradition.

When comparing Bolsonaro's heterogeneous base with the conservative voters of the 1980s researched by Pierucci (1999), a central difference one acknowledges today is the pervasiveness of a neoliberal rationality in Brazilian society. Those who, at the end of the military regime, voted for conservative candidates may have much in common with contemporary New Right voters, but have one key difference: they were advocates for state intervention in the economy. The advancement of neoliberalism in Brazil in the 1990s and its reformulation during the PT governments had unexpected effects that we are now witnessing: the authoritarian national tradition has now moved away from the state and into the arms of neoliberal movements and politicians. Pierucci (1999, p. 60) had made a distinction – which is often blurred today – between, on the one hand, the 'anti-communism' and 'neoliberalism' present in the discourse of politicians and, on the other, the voters and the 'voluntary activists' of the right who were committed to moral values (such as family and God – but not necessarily the Church) and mostly acting out of fear (which he ironically defines as their claim for self-defence). For the heterosexual, God-fearing, white lower middle-class family of the 1980s which Pierucci discusses, insecurity was centred around criminality and the threats posed by criminals to what was conceived as their 'property' – including their sense of self and social identities. In other words, it was not so much the red menace, or new economic agendas, that motivated these conservative voters but the preservation of 'traditional' family values against the promulgation of human rights through a strict law-and-order government.

This 'conservatism from below' of the 1980s was a moralist crusade conducted by radical anti-egalitarianists with authoritarian solutions. And yet, those all-fearing families presented no anti-communism in their speeches. For them, communism was not a threat – at least no longer. How then did Lula, the previously bearded communist, and the figure of 'the left' at large, become the target of a passionate anti-communist crusade nearly three decades later? And this despite Lula's manoeuvre to eradicate any perception of himself or the PT as communist.

The suggestion here is that the revival of this trope in Brazilian politics happened because anti-communism was fuelled as a threat to an already conservative population. It only turned against the PT when the revelations made by the Car Wash investigation painted the party and those associated with it as corrupted and therefore criminals. Thus, the striking continuity between conservative politics in the 1980s and today does not lie in the anti-communist crusade but in an authoritarian moralist one, demanding a high-handed imposition of law and order to protect society from criminals. Their view of human rights as 'criminal rights' was just another part of the story being played behind the curtains. In that sense, Lula was successfully depicted during street protests as 'Pixuleco': a huge inflatable doll dressed in prisoner's clothes. By becoming a criminal, Lula became the same old threat, and communism became, once more, a plague to be eradicated. By association, the PT's projects of social inclusion and diversity were also under scrutiny from a moral angle, to the point of promoting a renewed culture war. In short, anti-communism, as a recurring trope for external and internal political enemies (Patto Sá Motta, 2020), regained momentum in the mid-2010s, years which, unlike the transition to democracy in the 1980s, were marked by a generalised feeling of multiple crises and rampant corruption, for which the PT was seen as the main culprit. Linked to criminality, the 'communists' thus became the main menace to the conservative traditional family.

A generalised fear of criminality has been behind many increments of the 'law-and-order' agenda and of recent political investments, such as anti-corruption discourse, changes in gun ownership regulations, and in the use of lethal force by law enforcement officers. Since 2008 there have been attempts to make any police killing a heinous criminal act (Lacerda, 2019, pp. 114–18), while the number of deaths attributed, formally or informally, to the police is one of the highest in the world. At the same time, Brazil has the third largest incarcerated population, behind the United States and Russia. One central dimension of this problem is the persistence of the militarised nature of street cops, despite sustained demands (Almeida, 2020) – even from inside the force – to make them civil officers. Previous efforts to disarm the population are being reversed under the Bolsonaro government, since there is a gun rights movement in progress with the justification of granting the possibility of self-defence to the ordinary 'good citizen', who would stand his ground against

'criminals' and protect his family and properties (Lacerda, 2019, pp. 127–9; Casado and Londoño, 2020). Bolsonaro has long received strong support from the lower ranks of militarised officers, including street cops. The 'law-and-order' agenda both informs the government's initiatives and attends to the historically conservative population that is represented in segments of the New Right.

As several of the chapters in this volume indicate, the country was moving into conservative land well before recent events took centre stage. In other words, we are suggesting that conservative and authoritarian positions were present but largely silenced during the decades of Brazilian re-democratisation. Beyond the conjunctural combination of background conditions Hunter and Power suggest, this volume considers the authoritarian Brazilian tradition (Schwarcz, this volume) and structural inequality (Moraes Silva, this volume) as equally important in understanding the transformation of a fringe political figure, such as Bolsonaro, into a 'myth'. In other words, one needs to consider both the changes and the continuities that mark this historical moment, refusing to attribute the electoral result only to a circumscribed sector of the population or to provide any singular explanation for such a complex phenomenon. While Brazil was forcefully confronted with its conservative face in recent years, to believe that authoritarian and conservative values are only present among Bolsonaro's voters would be another attempt to look away from the social realities that (re)surfaced in the last years.

Politics as culture wars

Radical provocation in defying cultural and religious establishments informs the logic of politics as culture war. The idea of breaking with existing practices and traditions, common to such different fields of social life as born-again Christianity and populist political discourse, is also present in the ways far-right political forces present themselves. (See also Smith's 2019 analysis of contemporary Brazilian politics, where she makes the case for a specifically clergy-driven nature of culture wars.) From Pat Buchanan (the US paleoconservative) to Steve Bannon (former executive chairman of the far-right *Breitbart News* and White House chief strategist in 2017) to Jair Bolsonaro, a relevant part of politics has become a battle over ideas and their diffusion on the old and new media. The far right seems to have taken Gramsci's theory that political change *follows* cultural and social change quite seriously.

Indeed, Olavo de Carvalho, one of the most influential ideologues of the Brazilian New Right, has been accusing the 'leftists' of waging a Gramscian culture war against the country and its morals for decades (Carvalho, 1999, 2002, 2008) and has been calling for the creation of a 'New Right'. The constitution of this New Right has many sides and Rocha's chapter in this volume traces some of its trajectories, in particular the development of circles

of the neo- and ultra-liberal New Right. In Carvalho's view, the military regime's 'mistake' was to fail to acknowledge the relevance of culture wars and it was hence necessary to organise the political right to respond to this affront. Two main battlegrounds have been identified by the ideologue: the old media (chiefly newspapers and television) and the formal public education system (schools and universities). Arguing that there is no space for conservatives in those formative places, the first move was to promote their ideas elsewhere – hence the strong use of new media (online teaching, YouTube, social media) and private cultural centres. His bestselling books attest to his popularity growing exponentially over the last years, during which he has not only become an important player in national politics, but also saw many of his former and new students occupying government positions.

Congressman and former vice-leader of the government in the Chamber of Deputies (lower house) Carlos Jordy affirmed in a recent interview that 'Gramscism' is a major current threat to Brazil, as it has infiltrated people's minds and even 'people who think they aren't socialists . . . think like socialists' (Bevins, 2020). Declarations like this one are much in line with Olavo de Carvalho's teaching and are indicative of the general climate of transforming leftist theories and theorists into catchwords in the anti-liberal crusade undertaken by some of Bolsonaro's core followers. As Gambetti (2018, p. 4) put it, the far right 'has read Gramsci well enough to know how a hegemonic struggle is to be waged. And they correctly suppose that the left still retains the upper hand in the creation and maintenance of culture.' Viewing mainstream media as – at best – unfriendly to the New Right project, it is not surprising that Bolsonaro refused to attend debates on national television with other candidates and focused instead on directly reaching Brazilians via social media and especially via the direct messaging application WhatsApp (Cesarino, 2020).

Reacting to the news of Bolsonaro's election, Filipe Martins, foreign policy adviser to the president and disciple of Olavo de Carvalho, tweeted: 'The new crusade has been decreed. Deus Vult!' Using a far-right catchphrase,² Martins declared the inauguration of a new era in Brazil: one that projects into the country's future a mythical, uniformly white, patriarchal and Christian version of the Crusades and emphasises Brazil's European (via Portugal) heritage. Despite its reference to the Middle Ages, this rhetorical strategy does not

2 *Deus Vult* ('God wills [it]') is a Latin Catholic motto associated with the Crusades, more specifically with the First Crusade of 1096–9. It has been repurposed by the far right as a code word denoting anti-Muslim racism and Judeo-Christian pride without engaging in direct hate speech. Much of the motto's use on social media indicates a fashioning of far-right activists as 'modern Crusaders' fighting to protect 'Western Christian values'. In the Brazilian context, medieval historian Paulo Pachá has suggested that the use of this battle cry by far-right groups is tied to a 'reactionary revisionism' which presents Brazil as 'Portugal's highest achievement, emphasizing a historical continuity that casts white Brazilians as the true heirs to Europe'. See further <<https://psmag.com/ideas/why-the-brazilian-far-right-is-obsessed-with-the-crusades>> (accessed 5 April 2020).

attempt to recover a moment in the past – which, indeed, never existed – but to shape the future. It exhorts the conservative citizen to consider himself as noble and brave as the mythical crusader, hence as the force of good fighting evil. Using the far-right lexicon, or tapping into its codes and rhetoric, is not a strategy unique to Martins – who instigated a closer collaboration between Steve Bannon, his far-right populist organisation the Movement, and the Brazilian government – but is commonly shared among sectors of the Bolsonaro government.

As political struggles over cultural hegemony are shaping public debates, analysts have stressed the value of transgression in reactionary politics. Rocha (this volume) argues that Brazilian conservatives construe themselves as a kind of counterpublic (Warner, 2002) that stresses their discomfort by deliberately behaving in an impolite manner. Their aim is not only to shock and quash a conventional ‘politically correct’ behaviour but also (and perhaps mainly) to frustrate and extend the limits of what are considered appropriate and accepted ways of conducting oneself in the public sphere. In his study of the history of Western conservative politics, Corey Robin (2018, p. 25) shows that ‘the embrace of radicalism on the right’ is not antithetical to its tradition but, on the contrary, ‘it has to do with the reactionary imperative that lies at the core of conservative doctrine’. Conservatism, being an ideology of reaction, argues Robin, seeks to reconfigure the old and absorb the new it tries to change. In light of recent strategies employed by far-right movements and leaders across the world, especially with the use of digital media, it has been suggested that the far right ‘understands the value of transgression, edginess and counterculture often better than their left-wing opponents’ (Nagle, 2017, p. 61), advancing its political role by setting the tone for public discourse.

An issue that has troubled many analysts in the run-up to the 2018 presidential elections and afterwards has been the public manifestation of intolerance. Authoritarian populist politics appear to have recovered an old conception of difference as fixed and strictly segregative. Schwarcz (2019) has noted that the concept of ‘difference’ has been used to discredit rather than acknowledge the diversity of the human experience. While especially from the 1980s onward the claims for inclusive social policies amplified the perception of diversity in politics (see Arruti and Held, this volume), a strict egalitarianism at all levels could not be fully realised and inequality could be best dealt with by ‘respecting the diversity’ (Schwarcz, 2019). As Pierucci (1999) also shows, the old conservatism from before the 1980s was still pushing for an essentialised vision of ‘difference’, marked by regional, racial and gender prejudices. Over the last three to four decades those conservatives were told that speaking out was not acceptable and that a change of behaviour was needed for re-democratisation to succeed.

Yet the present historical moment makes clear that prejudice and intolerance were never satisfactorily abandoned but were rather silenced and dissimulated

in the public sphere under the surface of a more inclusive citizenship and a long-venerated 'tolerance ritual'. This was exemplified in the socio-political field through such concepts as 'cordiality' (Holanda, 2012 [1936]; see also de Souza Santos, 2019). Recent years have witnessed the return of those dispositions through open confrontation and expression of polarisation in a new fashion as attacks on political correctness and claims of freedom of speech. As Schwarcz (2019) suggested, unlike the past, today many Brazilians do not care to be defined as pacific but rather they prefer to parade their intolerance (2019, pp. 211–16). For Schwarcz, the decisive turning point for the transition from tolerance to intransigence was the 2016 impeachment: it lifted the lid 'of the cauldron of resentment, which spilled over into a deliberate politics of hate and polarisations' (Schwarcz, this volume).

Ruth Wodak and Pieter Bevelander (2019), in their introduction to a volume on populism and nationalism, discuss political scientist Ivan Krastev's reflections on growing xenophobia and fear of Islamisation in several Eastern European countries. According to Krastev, such phenomena are better understood as a popular reaction to these countries' brain drain. With people continuously leaving their homes, many of those left behind are 'afraid "their" culture, language and traditions might die out. This is why, Krastev argues, they close their borders to migrants and refugees coming from elsewhere, especially if the latter are Muslim' (Wodak and Bevelander, 2019, p. 9). Muslims, perceived as antithetical to 'their' Christian traditions, are seen as radically different in cultural terms, and become the main target of local hostility towards the 'other'. If we consider this fear of 'otherness', expressed in European right-populist rhetoric as predominantly the fear of the migrant Muslim other, as more broadly a fear towards difference, then, in the Brazilian case, this may include a fear towards the culturally different domestic other (cf. Arruti, 1997). In this case, then, instead of a 'crusade' to protect the 'true' Hungarian, Austrian or other European from 'Islamisation', the battle is waged for the safeguarding of the 'true' Brazilian (the real patriot), at the expense and exclusion of other versions of Brazilianness.

But why is it that people now feel the liberty to proudly express intolerance? What are the conditions of possibility of such public manifestations of intolerance? Part of the answer, or a path towards answering, lies, we suggest, in shifting perceptions of 'reality' towards an understanding of a world in moral decay and a conviction of the absolute firmness of the radical dualism between 'good' and 'evil'. A Manichean populist lexicon is shaping political cosmologies and reduces the complexities of this world to an eternal battle between the 'righteous citizens' (*cidadãos de bem*) and 'criminals' (*bandidos*) (see Dullo, 2021; Hatzikidi, 2020). Wanting to create a new future in which people would live a 'traditional' way of life in the face of growing visibility and rights acquired by minorities and underprivileged social groups – such as Black people and *quilombolas*, indigenous people, women and LGBTQI+ people –

conservative Brazilians wished to help ‘restore order’ in the country by voting for a Christian patriarch with vociferous misogynist, racist and anti-democratic views (see especially the chapters by Schwarcz and the afterword by Terena, Tikuna and Soares, this volume). Not unlike what Robin (2018) describes as typically conservative, Bolsonaro’s election simultaneously expressed a reaction to what many saw as culturally and politically threatening and a willingness to bring about major changes.

In their discussion of the relationship between evangelical (neo-Pentecostal) churches and the media, Birman and Lehmann (1999) explored the intersection of religious conflict and conflict over political power and the control of the popular imaginary. Analysing the famous ‘*chute na Santa*’ – the incident in 1995 where Pastor Sergio von Helder, then head of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD) in São Paulo, kicked an effigy of Our Lady Aparecida, Brazil’s patron – Birman and Lehmann argued that ‘the war’ that broke out in its aftermath was not a merely commercial affair (between the rival networks Globo and TV Record), nor was it purely ideological (given the IURD’s political involvement), but it was rather about cultural hegemony (Birman and Lehmann, 1999, p. 150). The incident, they suggested, was not simply an attack on the possession cults and the Catholic Church, but – importantly – it also challenged or threatened ‘the cultural hegemony enjoyed by an intelligentsia and a political class educated and formed in a culture of Catholicism’ (Birman and Lehmann, 1999, p. 158). In light of the centrality of the attacks on the cultural, religious, political and intellectual Brazilian establishment in Bolsonaro’s electoral campaign and post-election period, Birman and Lehmann’s discussion of events more than two decades ago remains strikingly relevant. In fact, it points to the continuation of the culture war in another battleground: the soul of the citizen.

Evangelical Christianity in Brazil has been growing significantly in recent decades. Between 1991 and 2010, the number of Catholics roughly dropped by 1 per cent per year while that of evangelicals grew by 0.7 per cent. In recent years, both the Catholic decrease and the evangelical increase rate have accelerated. According to a survey published by the Datafolha polling institute in January 2020, evangelicals are now the majority among Christians between the ages of 16 and 44, a dramatic change for a country that still represents the largest Catholic community in the world.³

While there are several reasons for the expansion of evangelical churches in Brazil, one thing we know for sure is that their message is appealing and increasingly resonates with new converts (see also Lehmann, this volume). In them, followers find (among other things) affirmation of values and moral positions that are challenged elsewhere. Traditional hierarchies – such as

3 ‘Cara típica do evangélico brasileiro é feminina e negra, aponta Datafolha’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 13 January 2020, <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/01/cara-tipica-do-evangelico-brasileiro-e-feminina-e-negra-aponta-datafolha.shtml>> (accessed 5 April 2020).

heteronormative gender types and the nuclear family structure (despite the existence of a minority of LGBTQI+ evangelical churches; see e.g. Silva, 2016) – are being morally validated in such spaces and hence gain new impetus with the growth of evangelical churches and with the increasing participation of pastors and church members in formal politics (Carvalho Junior and Oro, 2017). This, however, should not be understood as a simple equation of evangelical conversion with increasing conservatism in the country but rather as an indication of the growing relevance of such issues as morality in relation to social change over the past few decades.

Morality has indeed been at the centre of social and political transformations in recent years, and Bolsonaro's election was partly due to his campaign successfully portraying him as a saviour for a country in moral dissipation. He demonised his political opponents as inherently immoral and corrupt and promised to save the country from total ruin. He ran on a campaign that fostered an image of a decomposing world – in which the figure of the devil is central – fundamentally divided between good and evil; between 'patriots' and 'leftist psychos' (*esquerdopatas*). This called for an almost divine intervention of a Messiah – Bolsonaro's middle name – or a '*mito*' who would denounce the corrupt and failed establishment and bring about hope and radical change. Bolsonaro availed himself of a language that drew on widespread millenarianism among Brazilian Christians and fused together messianic and populist rhetorics to portray himself as the heroic leader and 'saviour' (Bonfim, 2020; Lebner, 2019).

Finally, what Bolsonaro's election also proved is that the fragmentation of public spheres of interest is better addressed by an equally fragmented discourse. While at first glance the president's discourse may appear incoherent or contradictory, it forms part of a carefully structured political communication strategy with which Bolsonaro is able to reach different social and economic groups at the same time (Kalil, 2018, p. 7). This communication strategy, known as micro-targeting, was successfully implemented by Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, especially as it played out on Facebook (Marantz, 2020). Analysing a sample of widely distributed images on WhatsApp during the month immediately prior to the first round of the 2018 presidential elections, Rafael Evangelista and Fernanda Bruno (2019) suggested that 'messages were partially distributed using a centralised structure, built to manage and to stimulate members of discussion groups, which were treated as segmented audiences' (2019, p. 3). Their study of pro-Bolsonaro WhatsApp groups shows that in the Brazilian case too, political micro-targeting strategies operated together with disinformation campaigns (see also Davis and Straubhaar, 2020).

Building a perfect storm

We have already discussed the need to look at recent political transformations in Brazil as the result of deep-seated political legacies, such as authoritarianism,

and structural phenomena, such as socio-economic inequality, that came together at a critical moment of widespread discontent. Jair Bolsonaro left the political fringe and launched himself as an incorruptible Messiah with a mission to save the nation. But to succeed, he needed to convince voters that the nation's situation was indeed critical. People needed to see and feel the state of urgency the country was in and understand that the best (if not the only) way out of this crisis was the self-proclaimed political outsider. As anthropologist Jane Roitman (2013) pointed out, the diagnostic and narrative of crisis is a particular political device that enables a position of criticism with specific propositions and solutions. In other words, Bolsonaro did not simply avail himself of the existing climate of crises (economic, political, etc.) but contributed to its creation by performing crisis to build a perfect storm.

Sociologist Rogers Brubaker (2017, p. 377) has argued that 'the active, discursive bringing-together or tying-together' of different crises and physical insecurities and anxieties of the population that political actors and the media 'dramatise, televisualise, and emotionalise' contributes to the creation of a perfect storm. Such association, between political actors who perform, or actively engage with, crises and a population that experiences the ensuing anxieties, is often made about populist politics. Writing nearly twenty years ago, Paul Taggart (2004, pp. 275, 282–3) suggested that populism is a reaction to a *sense* of extreme crisis; of a feeling of living at a turning point in history and that politics as usual cannot deal with the unusual and urgent conditions of the moment. More recently, Nicole Curato (2016) argued that Duterte's 'penal populism' is best seen as a 'negotiated relationship' between the leader and his constituency which builds on two distinct, but mutually reinforcing, political logics: the politics of anxiety and the politics of hope. While Duterte built a narrative of crisis by politicising the public's 'latent anxieties', which thereafter became central, his penal populism – which, much like Bolsonaro's punitive public security discourse, drew a rigid dichotomy between the 'virtuous citizens' and the 'hardened criminals' beyond redemption that needed to be eliminated – carried with it the promise of justice, and hence a politics of hope among the Filipino population (2016, pp. 94, 102–6).

The apparent paradox which lies at the heart of penal populism perfectly captures the tensions inherent in crisis moments, where feelings of anxiety, fear and anger coexist with feelings of hope for change. Elchardus and Spruyt (2016, p. 125) have argued that political choices are moulded by perceptions of how society is doing, suggesting that populism 'appears primarily as a reaction to a societal diagnosis'. They emphasise the role of 'declinism', understood as a negative view of the state of society (2016, p. 117), in the support for populist candidates in Western Europe. Their understanding is that in this option lies a politics of hope; the promise of a return to 'the good society'. Paul Taggart's concept of the 'heartland' similarly proposes 'a territory of the imagination' (2004, p. 274), representing the good life as it supposedly once was, as a

core theme of populism. From this perspective, populism is 'felt rather than reasoned' and it is 'shrouded in imprecision' (2004, p. 274).

Undeniably, populism has passionate advocates and critics. For some, for example, populism is 'an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1670), whereas for others it is a phenomenon 'integral to democratic processes since time immemorial' (Kapferer and Theodossopoulos, 2018, p. 1), yet one that proves to be 'highly vulnerable to forces that are potentially opposed to the system of democracy' (ibid., pp. 7–8). Populism is often understood as exclusionary – particularly in its far-right and authoritarian variants – but it is also associated with different forms of inclusion, as seen especially in leftist populist experiences, such as that of SYRIZA in Greece (see e.g. Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). In Brazil, as Jorge Ferreira (2001, p. 12) reminds us, after Fernando Collor de Mello's election in 1990, populism was no longer associated with a particular historical period but was seen, by a part of the population and academia alike, as a 'real curse on domestic politics', associated with notions of mass manipulation. While the very usefulness of the concept continues to be challenged by many – with some opting for 'limiting', historically situated emic concepts which, they argue, can better describe local specificities (e.g. Gomes, 2014, p. 19) – populism theorists strongly defend its use as an analytic category, suggesting it can 'bring into focus important aspects of contemporary politics' (Brubaker, 2017, p. 367).

Most populism scholars today agree on a definition – one that emphasises an antagonistic division between 'the people' and a powerful group generally understood as 'the elite' or 'the establishment' – but there is still disagreement about the type of phenomenon that populism is (Moffitt, 2020, p. 11). While an exploration of the genealogy of the concept and the different attempts to describe it (notably, as a thin-centred ideology, a discourse, a political strategy and a performative way of doing politics) is beyond the scope of this introduction, we are here particularly interested in those studies that emphasise 'the performativity of crisis as an internal feature of populism' (Moffitt, 2015, p. 190). Based on the premise that crises are never 'neutral' events but are always mediated and performed by political actors, this approach invites us to see populism acting as a trigger for crisis, instead of seeing crisis only as a trigger or necessary precondition (Laclau, 1977, 2005) for populism. For scholars who follow this approach, the 'performative staging of a wrong' (Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt, 2021, p. 3), that is to say, the performative construction of crisis around a set of events, is what distinguishes populism as a political phenomenon.

As discussed already, in the years leading up to the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil, the PT was increasingly seen, by part of the population, as the main culprit behind large corruption scandals, the revelation of which profoundly shook the political establishment. The coming together of political and

economic crises, together with pivotal socio-cultural changes – the ‘progressivist shock’ Rocha discusses in her chapter – and religious transformations, created propitious conditions for the emergence of an impactful performative dimension of crisis, one that would accentuate the feeling of living at a critical moment which required an unorthodox response. Building a narrative of crisis around the fundamental corruption (understood in profoundly moral terms) of the entire political class, and of the former governing party (PT) in particular, Bolsonaro’s performativity of crisis tapped into pre-existing crisis narratives, fears and anxieties. Drawing on such narratives, he painted the entire society as contaminated (or in fear of contamination) by the deleterious acts and legacy of the PT administrations and promised to return the lost ‘heartland’ of conservative Christian values to the law-abiding citizens and patriots who had been wronged for too long.

A key element of populist performativity is what Pierre Ostiguy (2017, p. 3) has described as the ‘flaunting of the “low”’. According to this view, populist actors adopt a style – ranging from the way they dress and wear their hair to the way they speak and eat – that resonates with particular segments of the population. It is important to note that these ‘low’ cultural appeals that inform the political relationship between populist leaders and their voters are linked to an antagonistic understanding of socio-cultural differences: the populist actor embraces (and embodies) ‘what has been “disregarded” in the polity’ (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 85). We could think of Boris Johnson’s ‘messy’ hair or Jair Bolsonaro’s ‘passion’ for condensed milk and bread snacks, but also of the indecorous and ‘candid’ responses to the press or members of the opposition and of defending controversial issues in polemical speeches. As Brubaker (2017, p. 367) put it: ‘Since the body is a potent political operator and signifier, proximity to “the people” can be communicated and performed through gesture, tone, sexuality, dress, and food.’ The appeal of this ‘proximity’ draws on existing social cleavages which are politicised. The limits of what is considered ‘proper’ or ‘acceptable’ political behaviour are redefined, while the values of informality and transgression are once more asserted.

The performativity of crisis by populist actors hence shifts the horizon of the political and social field of meaning, redefining what is achievable and ‘the limit of what is representable within it’ (Laclau, 2005, p. 81). Such performativity may thus expand the horizon of emancipatory possibilities, providing conditions for broader political participation and democratisation. Political imagination can unfold beyond the existing ‘real’ to include utopian visions of a better collective future once the crisis moment is past. It may also, however, produce the reverse: a contraction of the socio-political space for debate, participation and dissent, leading instead to further discontent and resentment, or indeed to disengagement and a cynical understanding of politics. For as Margaret Canovan (1999, p. 13) famously argued, ‘unrealistic visions may be a condition of real achievements as well as being a recipe for

disappointment'. In what follows, we will look at some of the ways in which the performativity of crisis was manifested by Jair Bolsonaro and his campaign, and the implications of such narratives and acts for popular perceptions of reality and truth.

Conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns

'A spectre is haunting the world – populism.' With this phrase, Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner opened the short introduction to the now classic volume *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, first published in 1969, adding that at the time of writing the question of communism sounded 'a little out of date'. Yet as discussed already, mainstream political discourse in Brazil in recent years suggests otherwise. Indeed, the spectre of communism, in a revamped Cold War-era rhetorical mould (Solano, 2019, p. 311), and often interchanged with the menace posed by the so-called leftist cultural hegemony, was one of the key items that shaped populist discourse and stirred up public debates for and against Bolsonaro in the run-up to the 2018 presidential elections. Conspiracist rhetoric was an important component of such discourse, which reached millions of Brazilians through the unprecedented use of social media as a main channel for political campaigning and direct communication with 'the people'.

From 'cultural Marxist indoctrination' and 'gender ideology' strategies implemented at schools through such tools as the 'gay kit' to the 'sabotage' by Roberto Alvim's 'leftist aides' accused of having introduced Joseph Goebbels's phrases to the speech given by the then secretary of culture, conspiracy theories have spread into the mainstream through an avalanche of 'alternative news' that decidedly blurs Plato's distinction between *episteme* and *doxa*. For a long time ridiculed as paranoid and confined to the fringes of society, heterodox knowledge appears to have made a forceful comeback and, while still stigmatised, it exerts growing influence (Butter and Knight, 2018, 2020). In this process of 'mainstreaming the fringe' (Barkun, 2016, p. 4), social media and other online platforms play a key role in widely diffusing such information and increasing its visibility.

Disinformation campaigns, blending facts with deliberately misleading material, also present a threat to democracy in that they may serve specific authoritarian agendas that wish to attack democratic institutions and individuals by instigating fear and mistrust. The Covid-19 pandemic has spawned a new wave of false narratives around the world, and Brazil was one of the countries that was especially affected by them. Misinformation and disinformation can prove especially dangerous in tackling major health crises, as people may hesitate to follow the recommendations made by health experts, ignoring or underestimating the risks involved. President Bolsonaro first dismissed the virus's existence ('fantasy') and then seriously curtailed its importance ('little

flu' – '*gripezinha*' and '*resfriadinho*'), while accusing the press of hysteria and of seeking to overthrow him. His consistent attempts to downplay the importance of prevention – rejecting the use of masks and the need for social distancing – and his active encouragement of Brazilians to continue their lives as before the pandemic has been at least partly responsible for a great number of Brazilians refusing to follow public health guidance – such as that given by the World Health Organization – which contributed to one of the highest infection and death rates in the world.

In a 2019 interview, anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro suggested that Bolsonaro's government was undertaking a deliberate political plan of anti-liberal cultural regression which aimed to introduce confusion and denialism. In such a dystopian development, he argued, it is reality itself that has become hard to believe (Barros and Domenici, 2019). In light of our discussion, however, a prominent question arises: whose reality is believable? The term 'alternative news', attributed to Kellyanne Conway, counsellor to the former US President Donald Trump, is becoming widely used and it aims precisely at obfuscating the limits of what can generally be considered as 'real'. Can we establish consensus on what 'reality' is in the era of 'post-truth'?

For Schwarcz (2019), nothing is hard to believe when, in the 'us'-versus-'them' polarisation, the 'others' are stripped of any moral limits; they can hence be considered capable of anything and charged with every possible accusation. In the Brazilian case, Ashley Lebner (2019) suggests that such Manichean views of reality resonate with a messianic Christian tradition of a decomposing world under attack by the forces of evil – so there is a much broader and deep-seated structure where populist and conspiracist rhetoric can be accommodated. In calling attention to the importance of considering Christianity when analysing the rhetoric of moral crisis, especially around 'the fundamental corruption of politics' in Brazil, however, Lebner is also cautious to remind us that 'Christian rhetoric around evil doesn't always mobilise Christians, even if it resonates' (2019, p. 144).

It seems nonetheless, to have indeed been significant for a part of the population in 2018. Explaining her thesis of the 'bolsonarization of Brazil', Esther Solano (2019, p. 319) argued that a 'wish for a messianic justice against the enemy' was one of the elements that prevailed in the run-up to the 2018 presidential elections. And while millenarianism may well have a place in the public sphere – for, as Cornel West (2011, p. 132) has suggested, its very disruptions are calls to attention that make people see realities that make them uncomfortable – Bolsonaro's far-right populist discourse sees society as fundamentally divided between 'righteous citizens' and 'criminals'. This discourse, which is historically shared by many conservative Brazilians (Pierucci, 1999; Caldeira, 2001), brings to the fore the role of the 'enemy', central to most populist rhetorics across the political spectrum. Hence, if we consider Brazil's 'biblical culture' (Velho, 1995), its 'Catholic secularity' (Dullo,

2015), and the widespread influence of millenarianism (Pessar, 2004), the multiple faces of the 'enemy' ('leftists', 'communists', 'feminists', 'atheists' and so on) are transformed into a complex and multivalent 'political category of accusation' (Almeida, 2017, 2019) where a deep-rooted Christian polarisation of good versus evil finds a secular populist frame.

Others have also pointed to the adoption and amplification of the 'good' versus 'bad' division of society – which is of course not exclusive to the new-right but resonates across the political spectrum – by mainstream media. Martijn Oosterbaan (2017, p. 84), for example, argued that 'the Brazilian news media conspire to construct an image of society that is fundamentally divided between "the good" and "the bad"'. However, it is important to note that neither Bolsonaro nor the New Right were the ones who initiated this polarisation, which has been escalating since the June 2013 street demonstrations (Dullo, 2021), but rather they capitalised on and aggravated it. The fragmentation of the public sphere, already composed of distinct publics and their counterpublics, which instead of talking to each other were mostly talking to themselves, was intensified by digital echo chambers that reinforce confirmation bias (Kolbert, 2017) and affirm people's own 'truths' – both on the New Right and on the 'old left'. Bolsonaro established his 'internal antagonistic frontier' (Laclau, 2005) early on: the PT and all those who supported it, and even those who did not vehemently oppose it, were conniving against the will and power of 'the people' and Brazil itself. For order and progress to be restored, the corrupt leftists had not only to be defeated but also to receive an exemplary blow, a vote of punishment, which would force them to retreat. In this process of polarisation, identities were naturalised, and difference, as discussed earlier, was reconfigured as fixed and strictly segregative.

After evidence came to light in the lead-up to the first round of the 2018 elections – especially from a study that analysed posts in 347 WhatsApp chat groups, undertaken by the fact-checking platform Agência Lupa in collaboration with researchers from two public Brazilian universities (USP and UFMG) – that much of the content that was circulating through the messaging app relied on a network strategy in which 'fake news' was first sent to regional and local activists, who would then spread the messages widely to private and public groups, it became clear that social media had played an important role, unprecedented in a Brazilian presidential campaign. Social scientists and journalists studying digital disinformation observed the ubiquitous presence of metalinguistic patterns structuring the massive volume of content – memes, videos, audios, texts – firehosed on certain social media networks, such as WhatsApp groups, during and after the 2018 electoral campaign. They have argued that some kind of 'science of populism' must have oriented their design and implementation (Cesarino, 2020; see also Nemer, 2018 and Campos Mello, 2020).

Such phenomena did not end with the presidential election. Known for his prolific online activity, Bolsonaro is applying populist rhetoric to address his political base directly, bypassing traditional media where speech is often moderated. It is well known that social media creates the impression of direct and unmediated interaction (Urbinati, 2015) with people in positions of power. ‘Followers’ often see themselves as ‘actors’ in the political scene, being able to directly get in contact with a country’s leaders through online platforms. As Waisbord and Amado (2017) showed, however, presidential communication on social media remains essentially top-down. In other words, participation in what appears to be an open online dialogue veils an often strictly circumscribed space for engagement and interaction. While this is a complex and multilevel phenomenon, the analysis of which goes beyond the scope of this introduction, we agree with Garmany who, in this volume’s final chapter, suggests that new technologies may decisively change the way we think of and engage with politics.

Overview of the chapters

The eight chapters that comprise this volume have been split into two large temporal foci: before and after the 2018 presidential election. Although all the contributors are interested in exploring the shifting horizon of political possibilities that enabled Bolsonaro’s rise to power and analyse, from different perspectives, specific transformations that were underway over the previous years, some turn more explicitly towards present changes and future challenges. We have thus decided to group them under two key questions: ‘How did we get here?’ and ‘Where are we going?’

In the first chapter, Lilia Moritz Schwarcz charts continuities and discontinuities in Brazil’s history and suggests that many of its past ghosts continue to haunt its present. In line with this volume’s understanding of the 2018 presidential election, as we have sketched in this introduction, she places the current authoritarian turn within global shifts towards conservative regimes and authoritarian populist leaders. In doing so, however, she reveals the tensions between the broader and the specific, suggesting that the Brazilian case ‘is neither a circumstantial nor a solely global question’, and traces Brazil’s specificities in the country’s ‘authoritarian roots’. Schwarcz delves into the past and shows that a long experience of slavery, patrimonialism and fiefdoms, lack of equal access to education, and violence continue to inform naturalised structures of hierarchy which shape a deeply unequal society. Attentive to the paradoxes of a country that has been oscillating between a self-image of tolerance and openness to diversity and a public exaltation of intolerance, as we have witnessed especially in recent years, she reminds us that democracy has, since its inception, been an inconclusive process, one that always needs to be remade and broadened. This observation allows Schwarcz to place the current wave of authoritarianism – which appears at times to be the antonym of

democracy – within the democratisation process, and suggest that a viable way forward is to adhere to the ‘golden rule of citizenship’: learning from difference.

José M. Arruti and Thaisa Held similarly emphasise the interruptions and continuities of the process of democratisation, focusing on the challenges faced by *quilombolas* in accessing and protecting their constitutionally guaranteed rights. Their analysis sets off from the premise that since 2016 Brazil has been experiencing ‘post-democracy’, or a process of ‘de-democratisation’, characterised by the gradual dismantling of social achievements – such as labour casualisation, revocation of social rights, reduction of public services – and a growing dismissal of the importance of socio-cultural diversity that, taken together, are essentially undoing the process of democratisation that had been taking place since the early 1980s. Their discussion, split into two main parts, examines how the processes of democratisation and de-democratisation affect the process of constructing the *quilombola* population (communities originally created by formerly enslaved people and their descendants) as a political and legal actor. In the first part, Arruti and Held show that despite the protection of *quilombola* collective rights to land and culture in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, the recognition of these rights has always been a hard-won conquest by the *quilombolas*, who faced important setbacks and were met with institutional resistance throughout the period of democratisation. In the second part, they outline some of the most visible and immediate effects of the de-democratisation process on *quilombola* communities. Their understanding is that while the processes of democratisation and de-democratisation are characterised by ambiguities and setbacks, Bolsonaro’s aim to consolidate his conservative political project, which prioritises the free movement of capital, is effectively leaving very little room for *quilombola* rights or indeed for socio-cultural and socio-environmental diversity.

In the third chapter, Camila Rocha explores the origins of the New Right in Brazil, highlighting the role of social media in providing alternative spaces for debate and the dissemination of ideas that did not always find space in traditional media, even from the early digital period in Brazil. Discussing the significance of two main pillars – radical free-market libertarianism and conservatism – for the development of the New Right, Rocha argues that they provided the ideological foundation for Bolsonaro’s campaign and, since 2018, government. In her analysis she places special attention to the role of Olavo de Carvalho in establishing a ‘shared political grammar’ among the New Right, in which the fights against globalism and leftist cultural hegemony were fundamental. Rocha shows that while these ideas have long circulated across the different counterpublics that met in online forums, it was only after the ‘progressivist shock’ of the early 2010s – with the establishment, for example, of racial quotas, and the extension of labour rights to domestic workers – that they began to attract new adherents and gain traction outside these online spaces.

David Lehmann, in the fourth chapter, delves into the evangelical ‘other’, at once familiar and unknown. Evangelicals have pushed forth a moral and intellectual transformation of the cultural background of Brazilian societies, attempting to bring their agendas on sexuality, gender, family and education into institutional politics, disrupting a historically established conception of *laicidade*. Due to this scenario, Lehmann asks us to take the evangelical presence in Brazilian society seriously in his effort to understand how their votes shaped the 2018 elections. Acknowledging the group’s vast internal diversity, Lehmann is exploring the ‘evangelical mindset’. He discusses the ways it may have influenced the political polarisation in the run-up to the previous presidential election, but also presents some of the challenges the progressive parties may face in the next. The attempt to circumscribe an evangelical mindset goes through pastors’ methods of mobilisation and the inspiration derived from textual sources into a ‘cult of the text’. Following their thread of hidden meanings, images, symbols and gaps in stories, Lehmann shows how this religious mindset put together a narrative of messianic unfolding. Inspired by a particular perception of Israel and the Jews, the messianic configuration connects the text, the ritual practices and support of Brazilian foreign policy in the Middle East.

In line with other chapters, Graziella Moraes Silva taps into the notion of processes that are open-ended and continuously negotiated in her analysis of racial formation in Brazil’s recent history. She takes a close look at the ways racial categories have been socially constructed and transformed in the past few decades. She does this by focusing on three intersecting levels of analysis: macro, meso, and micro. The macro-historical narratives are analysed through their interactions with global debates on race, observing Brazil’s transition from racial democracy to affirmative action. The institutional changes made to implement top-down policies that aimed at tackling structural racial inequalities provide the meso focus of Moraes Silva’s analysis. The previous two foci, and the changes they brought into effect, allow us to better understand the new tensions and disputes at the micro level, especially those around racial classification, and how state institutional practices may sometimes shape the latter. Her analysis of past categories offers a privileged vantage point from looking at the current administration and the colour-blind project which it embraces. While Bolsonaro’s racist comments are often dismissed as simply provocative, Moraes Silva importantly suggests that they do not operate in a vacuum but provide a frame for the implementation of policies that reproduce racial inequalities and privileges. At the same time, she also calls our attention to antithetical tendencies, such as bottom-up initiatives propelled by anti-racism – e.g. Black Lives Matter – and the growing visibility and empowerment of Black movements.

In chapter six, Andreza A. de Souza Santos looks away from state capitals, which often monopolise research attention, and focuses on the reality of 95

per cent of Brazilian cities, those with populations of less than one hundred thousand. Is the possibility of political engagement in a small city similar to those scholars have been portraying while researching in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo or Recife? At first, social media would appear as an equaliser, allowing many unheard voices to enter the public sphere. However, as de Souza Santos shows, there is no equal ability for people to express themselves and, in fact, political exposure can have harmful repercussions to someone living in precarity. The recent labour reform only worsened this situation, creating self-censorship and a current lack of protests. Through research carried out with a community association and looking at grassroots politics in a small city in the context of economic change, de Souza Santos asks how we can understand the silences in a country marked by protests, and what we can learn from the experience of those small cities. What can we make of silences, and how do they become strategic in a social context where the worker's political position may be antagonistic to that of their employer or when silence is the response to well-established neoliberal policies?

In chapter seven, Jessica Sklair gives a fascinating account of a little-known story: the Brazilian corporate and financial elite's political and social engagements, that is, of several employers who attempt to do good and make money at the same time. The divergences from better-known organisations of civil society are striking, even when one looks at this small and progressive strand of the economic elite. How do they understand and approach development? What are their aims and how do they connect with recent economic changes? By highlighting the notion of 'impact investing', Sklair shows that 'elite philanthropy has pursued an approach to development based on deeper incorporation of the entrepreneurial poor into the country's capitalist marketplace'; that is, the progressive elite aims at 'the fashioning of the entrepreneurial poor' in order to make them responsible for their own inclusion at the same time as looking for an increased consumption.

Suggesting that 2018 may be a pivotal moment for social movements, in the final chapter, Jeff Garmany raises crucial questions about the impact of Bolsonaro's election on the organisation and communication of political networks and of the relationship between state and civil society. Anti-PT sentiment has placed some doubts on the future of the left in Brazil, and Garmany wonders about a post-PT future. Considering the centrality of the party to recent democratic history, how will the left organise in a post-PT political landscape? If 'in Brazil, social movements rarely seek autonomy or anarcho-governance through mass mobilisation, but rather access to the state and its resources through vertically assembled leadership networks', this might be changing now, due to new technologies such as social media and increased access to cyberspace beyond geographical boundaries. Those changes are also transforming the position of intermediaries, which were 'central to political machinery in the past' and were used to control the engagement of the social

base of many movements. A more direct and autonomous form of collective action might appear, in which – as we are already beginning to see – alternative organisational networks can change the political landscape. However, as Garmany emphasises, the digital turn in Brazilian politics might also be far from a progressive change.

In the conclusion, the editors reflect on some of the issues raised in the book and consider the horizon(s) of political possibilities that may be emerging in Brazil ahead of the 2022 presidential election. The volume closes with an afterword written by three anthropologists, two of them indigenous Brazilians. In it, Taily Terena, João Tikuna and Gabriel Soares stress the continuities – as opposed to a rupture that Bolsonaro's election represented for many – between not only previous governments and the current one but also between the present authoritarian turn and the genocidal project against the indigenous peoples inhabiting Brazil since the colonial period. With a thought-provoking essay that dialogues with several of the volume's chapters, as well as with the volume's emphasis on continuities alongside disruptions, the authors affirm that while undoubtedly the threat of genocide is ever more present under Bolsonaro, the fear itself has never ceased to exist, becoming instead more of a norm than an exception for indigenous Brazilians.

The discussions in this volume bring to light some well-known and other little-explored aspects of contemporary Brazilian society, which, read together, help us better situate the political events that shook the country in recent years and continue to develop in different directions. Combining ethnographic insights with political science, history, sociology and anthropology, the interdisciplinary analyses included here offer a panorama of social and political changes in Brazil, spanning temporal and spatial dimensions. Their distinct foci, although not always in agreement, prove to be complementary, and together they provide a complex and fascinating account of politics and society in Brazil today. Taking as their point of departure the 2018 presidential election, the contributors discuss the country's recent – or more distant – past in relation to the present. Pointing to continuities and disruptions in the course of those years, the analyses offered are not only valuable guides to unpack and comprehend what has already happened, but also excellent pointers towards what may be coming next.

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