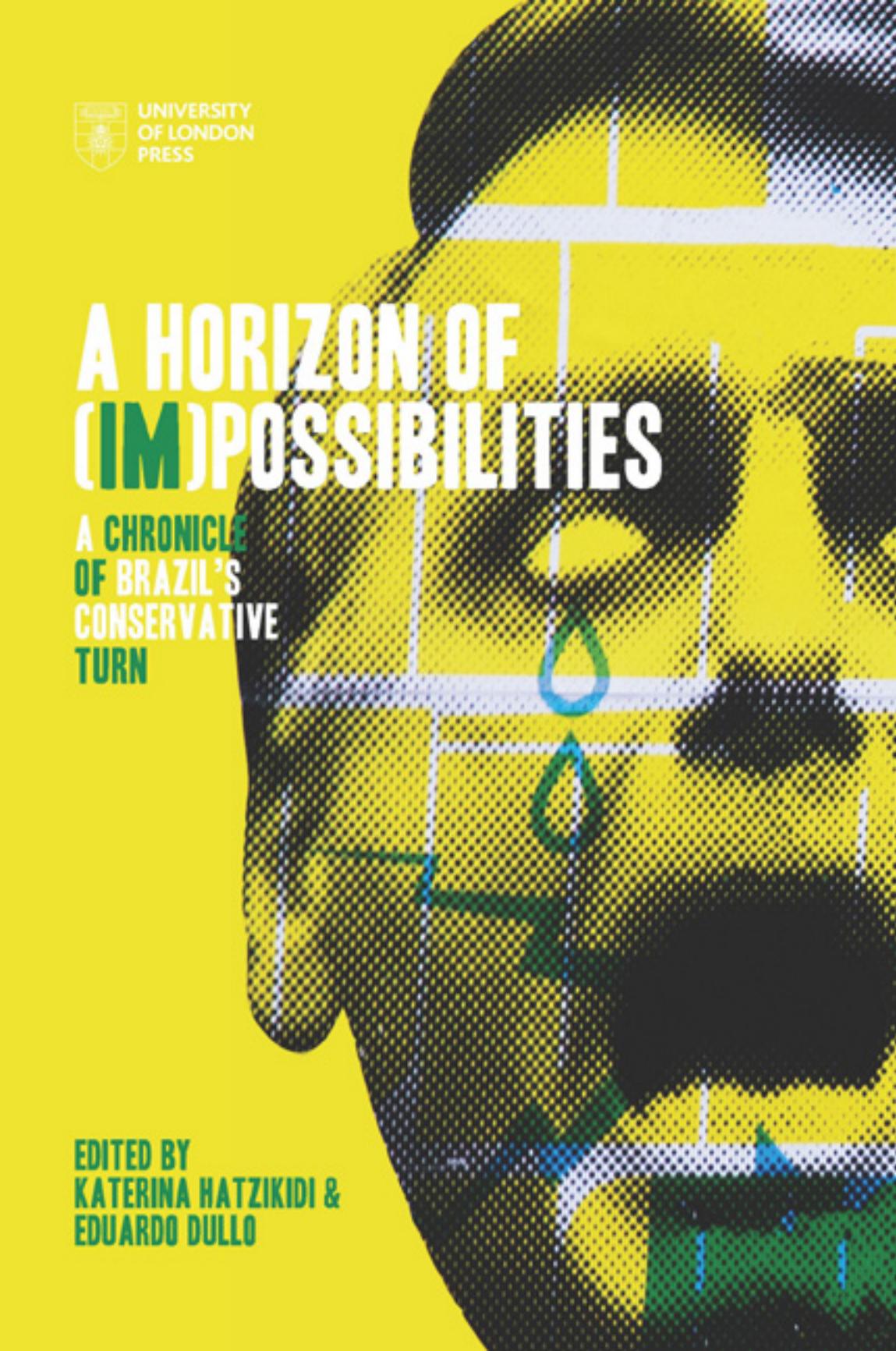
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON
PRESS
A HORIZON OF
(IM)POSSIBILITIES
A CHRONICLE
OF BRAZIL'S
CONSERVATIVE
TURN
EDITED BY
KATERINA HATZIKIDI &
EDUARDO DULLO

A Horizon of (Im)possibilities

A Horizon of (Im)possibilities

A Chronicle of Brazil's Conservative Turn

Edited by Katerina Hatzikidi and Eduardo Dullo

CLACS CENTRE FOR LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN STUDIES
SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

University of London Press
Centre for Latin American and Caribbean Studies,
Institute of Modern Languages Research,
School of Advanced Study,
University of London, 2021

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

This book is also available online at http://humanities-digital-library.org.

ISBN:
978-1-908857-89-7 (paperback edition)
978-1-908857-91-0 (.epub edition)
978-1-908857-90-3 (.mobi edition)
978-1-908857-92-7 (.pdf edition)

DOI: 10.14296/2109.9781908857927

Centre for Latin American and
Caribbean Studies
Institute of Modern Languages Research
School of Advanced Study
University of London
Senate House
London WC1E 7HU

All translations from Portuguese are by the authors unless stated otherwise in the text.

Contents

Conclusion: shifting horizons

Katerina Hatzikidi and Eduardo Dullo

As the wide-ranging discussions in this volume's chapters have shown, several of the central political issues Brazil is facing today are not entirely new but rather rooted in the country's deep-seated socio-economic and ethno-racial inequalities and authoritarian tradition. However, we also wish to emphasise that while it is important to identify and understand certain continuities, it is equally important to comprehend the distinctiveness and gravity of the present moment, which, as Garmany highlights in his chapter, is in certain ways 'highly unpredictable and historically unprecedented'. Recognising the structural and conjunctural elements that inform this moment, as we have tried to do throughout this volume, allows us to better distinguish and determine the horizon of political possibilities that crops up.

The presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, although still ongoing at the moment of writing, has had far-reaching effects on fundamental aspects of daily life that, independently of the outcome of the 2022 presidential elections, will undoubtedly leave their mark for years to come. The filmmaker and essayist João Moreira Salles (2020) wrote that:

> In less than two years, Bolsonaro has deteriorated [Brazilian] culture, education, environmental policy, the Federal Police, Ibama [the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources], Itamaraty [the Ministry of Foreign Affairs], Funai [the National Indian Foundation], the Attorney General's Office, Iphan [the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage], Funarte [the National Foundation for the Arts], Ancine [the National Film Agency], the Casa Rui Barbosa, the Palmares Cultural Foundation, the National Library, the Brazilian Cinematheque, the Ministry of Health, the Armed Forces.
>
> It is not a work of engineering. It is demolition.

From dismantling environmental policies and preservation mechanisms to underfunding public education and cultural initiatives to increasing extreme poverty and deepening inequalities, the government that came to power in 2018 has remained faithful to its promise to 'deconstruct' before beginning the work of construction. In the notorious cabinet meeting of 22 April 2020, the Minister of the Environment, Ricardo Salles, urged for further deregulation

K. Hatzikidi and E. Dullo, 'Conclusion: Shifting horizons' in *A Horizon of (Im)possibilities: A Chronicle of Brazil's Conservative Turn*, ed. K. Hatzikidi and E. Dullo (London, 2021), pp. 201–207.

of environmental policy while the media was 'distracted' by the Covid-19 pandemic. In response to a series of events that severely harmed environmental protection, while the ministry took no preventive action or acted to its detriment, the Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF) asked, albeit unsuccessfully, for Salles's removal. Monitoring the onslaught on the environment, some spoke of an authoritarian approach to environmental policy (Sanctis and Mendes, 2020) while countless reports denounced the government's deliberate inaction or action in favour of one of the most environmentally destructive phases in the country's recent history. The impact of deforestation, illegal mining and rampant fires on Brazil's biodiversity concerns everyone, yet it disproportionally affects indigenous people, *quilombolas* and other populations who live in and directly depend on the natural resources of many of those areas most devastated.

Combined with the effects of the pandemic, indigenous and *quilombola* movements speak of deliberate attempts of destruction of their forms of living and indeed of genocidal attacks against entire populations and ecosystems (see especially this volume's afterword and Arruti et al., 2021). In July 2020, Supreme Court Justice Gilmar Mendes publicly expressed his preoccupation with the inertia of the Ministry of Health in tackling the soaring cases of coronavirus infection among Brazil's indigenous populations, and warned the armed forces against being associated with a possible genocide. For some, the Brazilian president has long flirted with genocide and made it explicit in his electoral discourse when he routinely dehumanised *quilombolas* and indigenous Brazilians or when joking about shooting at *petistas* (Gherman, 2020). Yet for others, such an abominable perspective only emerged as potential reality after the government's stance on the pandemic and Bolsonaro's apparent indifference towards the victims. Eventually, and in light of ever-growing infection and death rates throughout the country, discussion of genocide exceeded the confines of any one particular social group and morphed into a heated national debate. Anti-government protests, such as *panelaços*, and discussions of impeachment also gained relevance.

Reacting to criticisms and accusations of genocide, the government often used authoritarian measures to silence dissent. For example, in early March 2021, Pedro Hallal, epidemiology professor and former dean of the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPel), was asked to sign an adjustment of behaviour agreement (*Termo de Ajustamento de Conduta*), after being accused of speaking inappropriately about the president in a webinar on the government's response to the pandemic. Hallal has been coordinating Epicovid-19, the largest epidemiological study of Covid-19 in Brazil (Hallal, 2021). On the webinar, he was speaking as an expert concerned with public health and yet felt that the accusation could cost him his job in the federal civil service (Alessi, 2021). By the end of the same month, in another high-profile case, the social media

influencer Felipe Neto was accused of committing a crime against national security for calling Bolsonaro genocidal, and was subpoenaed.

Although this volume is dedicated to understanding the specific conjunctive and historical conditions that enabled and fostered the rise and election of Jair Bolsonaro to Brazil's presidency, it is impossible to foresee what the rest of his time in office will bring and whether or not his phenomenal popularity will allow him to win re-election. In the first months after the Covid-19 outbreak, the president's approval rate appeared to be dwindling as he was losing key former allies, such as Sergio Moro. Bolsonaro also appeared to be losing the support of the middle and upper-middle classes, in response to what many saw as a disastrous handling of the pandemic and unresponsiveness to the collective suffering (Singer, 2020). As the death toll surpassed 100,000 victims, however, a Datafolha survey showed Bolsonaro's approval rate at its highest since the beginning of his term (Leite, 2020). As we write this conclusion in March 2021, Bolsonaro's rejection rate reached a 54 per cent high, with over 40 per cent of Brazilians pointing to him as the main culprit behind the worsening of the Covid-19 crisis (Gielow, 2021).

What Bolsonaro's fluctuating popularity makes clear is a sense of instability, which was certainly aggravated by the pandemic. A set of inter-related phenomena ranging from unemployment to diplomatic crises to former President Lula recovering his political rights (and therefore being eligible to run for president in 2022) have once again shifted the horizon of political possibilities in Brazil. The president doubled down on his refusal to take the pandemic seriously by presenting a false dichotomy between 'saving lives' and 'saving the economy' – false because the two cannot be dissociated from one another but are intricately connected. He favoured quick solutions offered by alleged magic bullets, such as antimalarial drugs with proven inefficiency against the coronavirus, and nasal sprays, even as the pandemic was spreading fast (Hatzikidi, 2020). But his polarising message, which refused to acknowledge the gravity of the situation, was becoming less influential as more Brazilians were impacted by the coronavirus.

The politics of transgression, including denialism, gradually lose their shock value when they become a sustained feature of political life. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) compellingly argued, the constant violation of democratic norms by would-be authoritarians in power often leads to public desensitisation and indifference. While the 'normalisation' of previously aberrant behaviour is a likely corollary of the 'bad boy' type of far-right populist conduct we have been seeing in recent years, what we are witnessing in Brazil seems to suggest otherwise. Indeed, an increasingly larger part of the population seems to react to the government's denialism by insisting on urgent everyday questions that will not and cannot simply be made to go away by looking away.

In a recent interview, the political scientist Fernando Abrucio suggested that 'the social question' has made a forceful comeback and will likely determine the

2022 presidential elections (Rebello, 2020). For Abrucio, Bolsonaro's efforts to maintain his faithful 'ideological base' by centring on conservative moralist values and culture wars distance him from a growing part of the electorate, for which healthcare, employment and schooling are pressing issues that demand urgent solutions. Furthermore, the incumbent government is also distant from (if not hostile to) questions of racial equality and justice that gained new impetus with the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, and the equivalent Vidas Negras Importam in Brazil, as Moraes Silva also discusses in her chapter.

Analysts and commentators have also observed that the anti-political and anti-expert climate that was in vogue before 2018 has been succeeded by a renewed interest (and trust) in experts – especially in light of non-experts involved in Brazil's inefficient response to the pandemic – and even in professional politicians. After Lula re-entered the political field as a potentially powerful presidential candidate with a pro-vaccination discourse that was met with enthusiasm, Bolsonaro appointed the fourth Minister of Health during his administration in an effort to counter criticisms without displeasing his most faithful 'ideological' constituency. Throughout this time, he has continued to claim to be with 'the Brazilian people' (acting for their benefit and speaking on their behalf) and saving the country from a series of disasters. While he and members of his family are involved in ongoing investigations on corruption and money-laundering schemes, Bolsonaro and *bolsonaristas* claim that his administration remains faithful to the values that got him elected in the first place: anti-corruption, anti-communism and pro-traditional family. Symptomatic of this stance is the president's declaration in October 2020 about the Car Wash investigation: 'I ended Lava Jato because there is no longer corruption in the government.'[1]

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, many commentators, especially in the press, have proclaimed (once more) the death of populism. Yet, as Cas Mudde (2020) observed, the reality is much more complex. It is true that issues that were highly polemical before the pandemic and politicised by far-right populist movements – such as public security and 'gender ideology' in Brazil, and fears of 'Islamisation' in Europe – no longer resonate so strongly. At the same time, however, the post-pandemic world will likely re-politicise issues of economic crisis, inequality and the welfare state, and populist movements across the political spectrum may successfully tap into these questions. The victory of the Democratic candidate Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential elections in the US may have ended a highly polarised Trump era, but it does not mean that would-be authoritarians will not continue to come to power via democratic elections in the US and elsewhere. As Viktor Orbán's popularity in

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pc-ADrWSOJs&ab_channel=UOL> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Hungary or the results of the Dutch elections in March 2021 indicate, far-right populist movements remain strong in many parts of the world.

A possible threat to Brazil's democracy in the near future lies in the possibility that Jair Bolsonaro's pandemic denialism be succeeded by 'electoral denialism'. As the Brazilian president has alluded to many times in the past, and again more recently, he may not trust the results of the elections if they are not favourable to him. Already in 2018, and despite winning, he falsely claimed that he had won in the first round without ever presenting evidence that corroborated his claim. During Trump's months-long refusal to accept the electoral result, Bolsonaro resumed his unfounded allegations that the electronic ballots were not reliable. A hacker attack (denial-of-service) against the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) in the last municipal elections gave the opportunity for fraud conspiracies to spread widely. Police investigation of the attacks, however, suggested that their aim was likely to instil doubt and discredit the reliability of the voting system, as Supreme Court Justice and TSE President Luís Roberto Barroso affirmed (Benites, 2020). Commenting on the US Capitol invasion of 6 January 2021, President Bolsonaro declared that if Brazil does not have paper ballots (*voto impresso*) the 'same thing' will happen or 'we are going to have a worse problem than in the United States' (Carvalho and Teixeira, 2021).

Bolsonaro's election in 2018 might be seen as the consolidation of a 'conservative return' that started at the time of the 2013 street demonstrations. In the course of the last decade, the process of re-democratisation has been undermined by weakening and attacking some of its central tenets, namely the expansion of social and human rights and the transformation of authoritarian sociality. One might even say (as do Arruti and Held, this volume) that Brazil is facing a de-democratisation moment. What is certain is that the horizon of possibilities keeps shifting and that Brazil is no longer 'a land of the future'. In moments like these, it is important, however, to hold on to a politics of hope, as Paulo Freire advised.

In her discussion of the Estado Novo period (1937–45), historian Angela de Castro Gomes (2014) suggested that its popularity left a dangerous legacy: the belief that only an authoritarian state can be efficient, given the 'inherent' corruption of professional politicians. This belief, however, was tragically proved false by the 1964–85 military regime, which showed that 'an authoritarian State can be extremely inefficient and unjust, besides being incommensurably violent, as was already known from the Estado Novo experience' (Gomes, 2014, p. 34). If memory of this experience is preserved, then Brazil may safely continue on its path to democratisation, Gomes forecast. Often, the horizon of political possibilities is blurry, reflecting a moving ground of pivotal events happening at a dramatic pace. Sometimes, however, we witness 'the emergence of a social and political constellation in which a clustered and concatenated series of events' becomes 'thinkable rather than unthinkable' (Brubaker, 2017, p. 368). In 2018 this constellation permitted the election of Jair Bolsonaro, who

became, for the first time in his long political career, 'thinkable' as presidential candidate. Although memory may sometimes be profoundly subjective and distorted by subsequent events, we hope, together with Gomes, that a collective experience of inefficient and unjust regimes will continue to guide the horizon of political (im)possibilities away from authoritarian adventures in the future.

References

Alessi, G. (2021) '"No futuro vão se lembrar que professores foram processados por criticar o Governo Bolsonaro", diz alvo de censura', *El País*, 6 March, <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2021-03-06/no-futuro-vao-se-lembrar-que-professores-foram-processados-por-criticar-o-governo-bolsonaro-e-uma-mancha-na-historia-do-pais-diz-alvo-de-censura.html> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Arruti, J., C. Cruz, A. Pereira, J. Sartori, C. Jardim Sousa, H. Barbosa de Gusmão, T. Bicalho Bertolozzi, CONAQ and ISA (2021) 'O impacto da Covid-19 sobre as comunidades quilombolas', *Afro Cebrap*: *Informativo desigualdades raciais e Covid-19*, <https://cebrap.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Informativo-6-O-impacto-da-Covid-19-sobre-as-comunidades-quilombolas.pdf> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Benites, A. (2020) 'Investigação sugere elo entre grupo que tentou derrubar site do TSE e bolsonaristas', *El País*, 17 November, <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-11-17/investigacao-sugere-elo-entre-grupo-que-tentou-derrubar-site-do-tse-e-bolsonaristas.html> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Brubaker, R. (2017) 'Why populism?', *Theory and Society* 46: 357–85.

Carvalho, D. and M. Teixeira (2021) 'Se Brasil não tiver voto impresso em 2022, vamos ter problema pior que os EUA, diz Bolsonaro', *Folha de São Paulo*, 7 January, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/01/se-brasil-tiver-voto-eletronico-em-2022-vai-ser-a-mesma-coisa-dos-eua-diz-bolsonaro-apos-invasao-ao-capitolio.shtml> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Gherman, M. (2020) 'Bolsonaro sonha com genocídio', *Época*, 25 July, <https://epoca.globo.com/michel-gherman/coluna-bolsonaro-sonha-com-genocidio-24549855?utm_source=Whatsapp&utm_medium=Social&utm_campaign=compartilhar> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Gielow, I. (2021) 'Datafolha: Rejeição a Bolsonaro na gestão da pandemia bate recorde e vai a 54%', *Folha de São Paulo*, 16 March, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/03/datafolha-rejeicao-a-bolsonaro-na-gestao-da-pandemia-bate-recorde-e-vai-a-54.shtml> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Gomes, A. de Castro (2014) 'O Estado Novo e o debate sobre o populismo no Brasil', *Sinais Sociais* 9(25): 9–37.

Hallal, P. (2021) 'SOS Brazil: science under attack', *Lancet* 397 (10272): P373–4.

Hatzikidi, K. (2020) 'Two years after Bolsonaro's election: Brazil on a perpetual campaign trail', *Open Democracy*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/two-years-after-bolsonaro-perpetual-campaign/> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Leite, P. (2020) 'Para 47%, Bolsonaro não tem culpa por 100 mil mortes no Brasil', *Folha de São Paulo*, 14 August, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2020/08/para-47-bolsonaro-nao-tem-nenhuma-culpa-por-100-mil-mortes-no-brasil.shtml> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Levitsky, S. and D. Ziblatt (2018) *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown).

Mudde, C. (2020) 'Will the coronavirus "kill populism"? Don't count on it', *Guardian*, 27 March, < https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/27/coronavirus-populism-trump-politics-response> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Rebello, A. (2020) 'Fernando Abrucio: "Eleitor evangélico mostrou que não é voto de cabresto"', *El País*, 1 December, <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-12-01/fernando-abrucio-eleitor-evangelico-mostrou-que-nao-e-voto-de-cabresto.html> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Salles, J. Moreira (2020) 'A morte e a morte: Jair Bolsonaro entre o gozo e o tédio', *Piauí* 166, July, <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/a-morte-no-governo-bolsonaro/> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Sanctis, A. and C. Hübner Mendes (2020) 'Autoritarismo na política ambiental', *Quatro cinco um: A revista dos livros*, 1 September, <https://www.quatrocincoum.com.br/br/artigos/a/autoritarismo-na-politica-ambiental> (accessed 29 March 2021).

Singer, A. (2020) 'La radicalización permanente de Bolsonaro', *Nueva Sociedad*, <https://www.nuso.org/articulo/Bolsonaro-Moro-Brasil-Lula/> (accessed 29 March 2021).