



The Brazilian presidential election: a perfect catastrophe?

by Sonia Corrêa

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We cannot minimize the scale of the catastrophe that happened in Brazil... We have the more extremist leader of so-called democratic nations and we must make a bet that this will continue as it is: perhaps, in the short run, we will not be any more amongst the democratic nations...If there is fear, freedom is not the same. If there is already an unsounded worry of not provoking the unmeasured reaction of powers that be, freedom is not anymore, the same. Today we have awakened less free than we were yesterday (Celso Rocha de Barros, Folha de São Paulo, October 29th, 2018)

Time to mourn

Politics is both reasoning and affect. Before trying to charter what has happened in the Brazilian 2018 election, I need to say that it is painful to write about it. Having watched the building up of Brazilian conservative politics around abortion, sexuality and gender for so many years now, I was not exactly surprised with the outcome. Even so the full-blown materialization of multiple right wing active formations in the ireful electoral process, the images of post-victory commemorations and the content of the elected candidate speeches have thrown me in an unknown land.

While processing this troubling sentiment I read and re-read a number of classical articles on Fascism but also some remarkable 2016 analysis of the Trump election. One of them, Teju Cole's [Time for Refusal](#) touched me deeply. Cole recaptures the Ionesco play "The Rhinoceros" in which the population of a whole village is mutated into rhinoceros as a metaphor for the diffusion of fascism in the following terms:

Almost everyone succumbs: those who admire the brute force of the rhinos, those who didn't believe the sightings to begin with, those who initially found them alarming. One character, Dudard, declares, "If you're going to criticize, it's better to do so from the inside." And so, he willingly undergoes the metamorphosis, and there's no way back for him.

In citing Cole, I do not want to suggest that what we are experiencing right now in Brazil is a mature stage of fascism, much less that all Bolsonaro voters are fascists. Current conditions are decidedly more complex and blurred. Yet, I felt physically the rapid and "absurd" mutation of the public sphere as the one portrayed by the play and it is frightening. As the Ionesco characters, I also came to realize that the 'unknown land' where I am now had been always lurking in the relatively inertial social conservatism that remained untransformed through decades of democratization. As in the title of the

article by writer Bernardo Carvalho published in Folha de São Paulo ([in Portuguese](#)) the problem is not Bolsonaro but “us”: entrenched layers of racism, classism, heteropatriarchies and authoritarianism ([in Spanish](#)) lying underneath the surface of Brazilian society that have been activated and converted into visible and, more than often, virulent rhetoric and action.

Since last week, I have been torn between the anxiety to more fully understand what brought us here and deep moments of sorrow. As my dear friend, the feminist philosopher Carla Rodrigues ([in Portuguese](#)) I have been mourning what has been already lost, deprivations lying at the horizon and, most principally, the potential carnage broadcasted by newly elected officials, including the president himself, as the “solution” to crime and violence. While these flows of estrangement, loss and grief cannot be glossed over, the reasonable examination of the road that brought us here remains vital for us to be able to re-exist.²

Systemic undercurrents

The overlapping undercurrents leading to what Celso da Rocha Barros portrays as the political catastrophe of the 2018 Brazilian elections are multiple and thorny. Years will elapse before they are more thoroughly understood. Yet, in an incomplete bird's eye view, they include continuing [patterns of inequality](#) and of [structural violence](#) that remained unresolved after three decades of democracy, as well as long history of entrenched political corruption. Another main trend not to be circumvented is decidedly the [growth of religious moral dogmatism](#), particularly in its evangelical expression, but not exclusively, as post 1980's Catholic conservative restoration has deeply affected the Brazilian Church. The low and non-sustained economic growth of the country (since the 1980's) must also be accounted for, in particular the recent recession (2014 onwards) that devastated employment rates and the income of poorer sectors but, as analyzed by Lavinás and Gonçalves ([in Portuguese](#)), has propelled the rightward shift of the middle classes.

We must also take stock of legitimate popular frustrations with the PT (Workers Party), in particular because of corruption, which erupted with other claims in 2013 and would be subsequently magnified by the far-right formations that gained leverage in the 2015-2016 protests to ouster Dilma Rousseff. The irascible anti-PT propaganda then crafted would become the backbone of Bolsonaro electoral strategy. Last but not least, as widely discussed nationally and internationally, this has been an almost fully cyber electoral campaign, mostly based on WhatsApp, whose legal and political implications have not been yet fully understood.³

When situated in the global landscape, the far-rightward political shift materialized in the recent Brazil election is quite drastic, but far from exceptional. It cannot be fully grasped, if not squarely placed onto the cartography of continuing neo-liberalization of the world economy and modes of living. From the internal point of view, it is not a full surprise, as signs of a conservative restoration were with us, at least since the mid 2000's, when they became more palpable, quite significantly, in the realms of abortion and sexuality rights legal and policy debates.⁴

Yet, until when these domains fully erupted at the center of the 2018 campaign, they were not viewed as "politically relevant" by most mainstream actors and observers. Right now, however, the complex connection between the gradual but firm rightward leaning of Brazilian politics cannot be fully apprehended if the transformations in gender and sexuality orders that unfolded in Brazilian society in the course of democratic re-construction, against the grain of the entrenched layers of conservative I have above mentioned above, are not taken into account. These changes are measurable in socio-demographic indicators -- such as female education levels and labor participation, fertility decline and deep changes in family structures-- but also

legal frames and new modes and expressions of being in the live world. The right-wing and authoritarian formations that took form in the Brazilian political landscape in the last five years must be read as a reaction to these transformations, but cannot be fully understood if not situated in relation to the other systemic dimensions briefly outlined above.

In the pages that follow I will share preliminary incomplete reflections that locate Brazil in the global landscape of de-democratization and tentatively explore how these intertwined dimensions refracted in the 2018 election trajectory and, in particular, how explicit anti-gender politics intersected with and became a cornerstone of the electoral dynamics.⁵

De-democratizing, late capitalism and anti-gender politics

The winding trails

After the 2016, US elections, SPW published a short note underlining that, without minimizing the weight of the US hegemony, Trump's arrival to power should not be read as exceptional, but rather as a new chapter in a chain of conservative restorations or undemocratic shifts that had been sweeping the world for some time. At the time, a number of analysts wrote about the end of American democratic exceptionalism, including Paul Krugman who, in his very first assessment of 11/9 dared to ask: "*Should we consider the US a failed state and society?*"

Taking a long view and tracking this chain in terms of shifts towards authoritarianism and de-democratization, regardless of their ideological orientation, I dare saying this trail began with 9/11/2001 and the subsequent "war on terror" that, as analyzed by a large number of authors meant a rupture with the cycle of democratization that began in the late 1970's and appeared to have fully blossomed after the end of bi-polarity in 1991. From a Latin American perspective, it is worth reminding that in 2001 a tentative right-wing coup framed up in Venezuela and, from a broader perspective, it is also significant that Putin and Erdogan, two current icons of autocracy came to power in 2003, while the US invaded Iraq.

Then by the end of decade, flagrant democratic regressions occurred in Honduras (2009) and Paraguay (2012) and Viktor Orbán was elected in Hungary (2010). From 2013 onwards, these retrogressions intensified. As the Arab spring dissolved under the shadows of war and the Sissi regime in Egypt, the symbolic effects of this 'defeat of democracy' reached far beyond the regional boundaries and all across the political spectrum. In 2014, the National Hindu Party (BJP) won the elections in India and Orbán was re-elected in Hungary. In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega reformed the constitution to ensure perennial re-election, while state violence and coercion against the opposition escalated in Venezuela. In 2015, an extremely conservative government was elected in Poland. In 2016, the 'parliamentary coup' that impeached Dilma Rousseff in Brazil (the ante-room of the 2018 elections) was followed by the election of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, the Brexit referendum, Erdogan's state of exception in Turkey, the defeat of the peace agreement in Colombia and last but not least Trump's election.

This ongoing trend has not exactly relented in the last two years. If in the recent French, German and Swedish elections ultra- right-wing forces gained muscle, in Italy they won. In South America, right-wing candidates were elected in Chile and Colombia (in this latter case in direct connection with the defeat of the peace agreement). In Costa Rica, an Evangelical party closely failed to get elected president meanwhile, in Nicaragua, the Ortega- Murillo regime moved towards blunt state violence against political dissidence.

It is also worth noting that beyond this more visible track of undemocratic events other shifts have occurred that barely capture the attention of the mainstream media and observers, such as the very recent coup occurred in Sri Lanka, halting incipient the incipient efforts of democratic re-construction that followed a long and bloody the civil war. Not less importantly, this continuous right and authoritarian leaning trend gives greater confidence to long standing and well- established autocratic regimes that will not be bothered.

After the October 28th electoral results, Brazil fully joined the trail. It is the new kid in block but not a minor piece in the global domino of de – democratization. As observed by CELAG ([in Spanish](#)), Latin America is now squeezed between right- wing powers ruling the “two big ones”. From a broader global South perspective, the BRICS, initially comprising authoritarian or autocratic regimes (China and Russia) and democracies (Brazil, India and South Africa), is now almost entirely undemocratic, despite the fact political leaders and the press of BRICS countries have already expressed their concerns and discomfort with Bolsonaro elections. In speaking of BRICS, it is also worth recalling that, throughout the above described cycle, China while consolidating its geo-economic global position has also gradually restored stricter state controls over political activities, making the mid 2000’s predictions of a gradual political liberalization propelled by market forces to sound as wishful thinking. In this re-designed global map, very few anchors of the democratic politics that took form globally after the 1970s - 1980s remain intact.

De-democratization enabled

With very few exceptions, these de-democratizing, rightward or openly authoritarian strands have materialized “through democratic procedures”. Furthermore, not all the political systems listed above are bluntly repressive and brutal, right on the contrary most can be described as formal and functioning democracies. Also, neither all their leaders are grotesque as Trump, Bolsonaro or Duterte . A number of them, are sustained in power through less stark means such as the squashing of political competitors and more subtle silencing of dissidents and few are quite enlightened. ⁶ A whole library is now available that scrutinizes how present and past democracies can deteriorate and have deteriorated towards autocracies, dictatorships and fascism. While it is not possible to fully recover the wealth of this vast literature, one key line of interpretation to bear in mind when examining the Brazilian post – electoral scenario is the intersection between late capitalism, democracy and de-democratization.

One main argument of this line of thinking is that, despite the faith in classical liberal tenets, capitalism in its current neoliberal and financial forms neither depends on or much less to ensure political democratic environments. Neoliberalism is highly adaptable. It was piloted in the Catholic Pinochet dictatorship to be later transported to the most diverse political environments across the world, including “Communist” China. Achille Mbembe, in a short article published in 2016, goes further to suggest that this formation is incompatible with democracy.⁷ Scott

Long, in assessing Trump election, has also addressed the neoliberal shadow hovering of democratic losses by emphasizing its land grabbing and extractives features, to conclude that it is not surprising that most powerful engine of the world economy is now ruled by a real-estate magnate who “*exercises a grotesque version of private property as pure performance*”. In calling attention to the neo-liberal propelled exhaustion of land and resources, Long also observes that the Amazon region remains one of the few territories still untapped by its furious drive of accumulation.⁸

Ultra-neoliberalism and the anti-gender crusade

Long’s observation brings me back to Brazil, where the political philosopher Vladimir Safatle, in one of his various insightful assessments of the 2018 electoral roller-coaster, noted that the Amazonian region, as well as a number of Brazilian public assets that, despite much pressure, have escaped privatization are now the targets of the powerful market forces who have increasingly supported Bolsonaro since last year. In his view, a neo-Pinochetista economic agenda is what lies at the eye of the Brazilian electoral storm, even when anti-corruption, anti PT and entrenched conservative moral discourses on gender, sexuality and abortion disseminated through a vast and efficient cyber machinery is what propelled this electoral victory.

In this context of analysis, it is worth recalling that the Pinochet regime was also firmly allied with the ultra- conservative sectors of the Catholic Church and imposed a rigid morality on Chilean society, including the complete criminalization of abortion. While the argument may be raised that such a collusion is typical of dictatorial regimes, Wendy Brown has shown, in *The American Nightmare* how these two formations intertwine in late capitalism, even under so called democratic conditions. In her scrutiny of the US during the Bush era, she critically examines how a rationality based on deregulation and amorality (neoliberalism) and a rationality based on regulation and morality (neo-conservatism), which appear not to have many affinities, became deeply imbricate, producing political subjects that, indifferent to truth, political freedom, and equality, tend to easily adhere to anti-democratic political agendas.⁹

Not everywhere this intertwining may be as compelling as in the US where these connections have been at work for many decades. Worldwide, the detrimental effects of neoliberalism translated into inequality and exclusion have, indeed, created disabling environments where de-democratization can prosper. But in not all settings where these effects are palpable right- wing populism and proto-fascist formations have surged. Hierarchical, androcentric (when not bluntly patriarchal), homophobic and disciplinary foundations of religious and secular politics of morality are functional to the

most varied forms of autocratic and authoritarian orders. Yet not all societies subject to these regimes have been so deeply penetrated by neoliberal rationalities. Context always matters.

In the same manner, it is inaccurate to conclude that the Vatican crafted crusade against “gender ideology” (Bracke and Patternote, 2016; Case; 2016; Fassin; 2016) that, since the early 2010s, has been deployed across Europe and Latin America (Patternote and Kuhar, 2017; Corrêa, Patternote and Kuhar, 2018) and has played a key role in the current Brazilian de-democratizing vortex is merely functional to or necessarily imbricated with ultra-neoliberal interest and rationalities. Firstly, because as a Vatican fabrication, it has its own rationales and long-term goals that may or not coincide with ultra- neoliberal interests. Not less importantly, though predominantly allied with right-wing forces, the anti-gender crusade has not rarely partnered at left side of the political spectrum¹⁰, including in Latin America where at the same it portrays “gender” as the new face of Communism, Castro- Chavismo or in Brazil, Petismo.

On the other hand, the highly ecumenical religious and secular formations and adaptable strategies through which the anti-gender crusade is being deployed enhances favorable conditions for the neo-liberal and moral conservative rationalities get imbricated, cross-fertilize and more effectively capture hearts and minds. Albeit tentatively, I dare saying this is exactly the case of Brazil.

“Gender as communism”: a politics of glue and assemblages

As insightfully grasped by the analyses performed by Isabela Oliveira Kali and her team of ideal types of Bolsonaro’s active supporters -- developed in the [companion report](#) to this essay, *Brazil 2018 Presidential Elections: Who are Jair Bolsonaro voters and what they believe*, authored by Isabela Oliveira Kalil -- a substantive part of his electorate shares ultra-liberal views on privatization in articulation as well as fierce repudiation to abortion and “gender ideology”. This adherence is informed by a number of convictions: the free market is synonym of democracy, if the state is corrupted and corrupting the private sector is not, legal and policy moral restrictions are not undemocratic but rather a due restrain of state intervention in privacy and family life. Within this formula corruption is a floating signifier simultaneously associated with politics, morality and the critique of state protection – in particular affirmative action - as an obstacle for individual achievements through merit. The “citizens of good”, core figures in the politics of the Bolsonaro camp are those who fight, interchangeably, at all these fronts.

The economic pieces of this assemblage were put into circulation by the social conservative ultra-liberals of Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL) and other “liberal” groupings that gained much leverage in the course of the last few years. Its more widely absorption has certainly been favored by gradual penetration, since the 1980s, of the neoliberal logic in the social fabric itself and, more significantly, by the pervasive influence of the neo-Pentecostal theology of prosperity, whose main spoke persons and faithful constitute the main champions and proportionally largest groups of religious voters of Bolsonaro ([check figures](#)). Yet, based on Fernando Serrano article, “ The perfect storm: Gender ideology and the articulation of publics” ([in Spanish](#)) analyzing

the eruption of “gender ideology” in the Colombia Peace Agreement Referendum – and whose title inspired the title of this essay), I would say that the final maturation of this assemblage into a lingua franca, now shared by a large number of his 50 million voters, has taken place at the encounter of the highly heterogeneous publics that gradually adhered to Bolsonaro’s candidacy in recent months.

In that respect, I disagree with Safatle’s analysis that Bolsonaro conservative moral agenda could be eventually read as smoke’s curtain that conceal the drastic neoliberalization of the economy and sociability lying at the core of his political program. Though further review of empirical data and elaboration is still required, using [Andrea Peto’s lenses](#), my own hypothesis is that in this process of maturation, the “gender ideology” device functioned as a symbolic glue collating disparate contents of the assemblage as well as its potential adherents. This glue did not collate exclusively contents and actors in the realm of sexuality, gender and abortion matters but also and, perhaps more noticeably, the disperse elements related to the other face of the device: the specter of communism. In Colombia, as analyzed by Franklin Gil, the 2016 attack on “gender ideology” in the Peace Referendum paved the way for the demonization of the left in the 2018 elections. In Brazil, “gender as communism” and vice-versa floated freely in the dense electoral cyber space itself, each of these elements feeding the political imagination and adherence of different groups of potential voters. While “gender” provided a glue to articulate all forms of moral corruption, “communism” operated as an open signifier of all “bad things” (corruption, Petismo, state protection that impairs merit, etc) that will “vanish” when the individualist, privatizing and free market policy portfolio of the government that will rule Brazil from January on is implemented.

What comes next?

As noted by various analysts, the economic components of Bolsonaro’s over- reaching ultra-conservative program cannot be quickly implemented as they are conditioned by many externalities: complicated Congress negotiations, investment flows and the very conditions of the global economy.¹¹ In contrast -- to recover a title we have used for the [Portuguese translation](#) of the 2004 SPW [report on Bush policies on sexuality](#) -- Bolsonaro’s Kamasutra (many positions on sex and gender) are more easily translatable into policy guidelines and legal frames, including because regressions in these terrains have been underway for some time. Since Bolsonaro is compelled to quickly deliver what he s promised to his vocal and energetic electorate it is not difficult to predict that the terrain of gender, sexuality and abortion will be immediately “droned” as translated in the e agenda proposed by the Evangelical group in Congress for the new administration and the next.¹²

The shadow of normalization hovering at the horizon is also to be named and addressed. Differently from the US where, in 2016, normalization began after- Trump, in Brazil normalization preceded Bolsonaro’s victory. Since the results of the first round, a wide range of political analysts, mostly located at the liberal center of political spectrum, began articulating the interpretation that Bolsonaro, although not the most desirable president, would be domesticated by the realities of power exercise and Brazilian checks and balance mechanisms considered solid by these observers. Though these views have

been contested from a variety of angles, including those pointing to present frailty of Brazilian institutional frames, these appeals have not relented. Rather, passed merely 10 days, a wide variety of actors have already begun to accommodate to the novel political conditions. One detrimental effects this expanding normalizing tendency is that it tends to blur or even conceal the stark reality: in current conditions undemocratic, authoritarian and violent discourses and interventions may be not enacted by state actors, but rather by forces now unleashed across the social and institutional fabric. This can be illustrated by a series of threats and attacks on “ideologization of education” targeting both academic and high school institutions since October 28th that have been already reported internationally. ¹³

Therefore, while still mourning, we cannot not get prepared.

Notes

¹ Sonia Corrêa is the co-chair of Sexuality Policy Watch. She is now coordinating a Latin American research Project on anti-gender politics in Latin America.

² Re –exist is a re-signification of the word resist. It was aired in social networks in the last two weeks and his invention is attributed to the theater director José Celso Martinez Corrêa, who has bravely resisted the military dictatorship.

³ See section 7 of the report [Brazil 2018 Presidential Elections: Who are Jair Bolsonaro voters and what they believe](#), authored by Isabela Oliveira Kalil

⁴ See the Brazil Case in Sonia Corrêa and akshay khana (2015) [Emerging Powers, Sexuality and Human Rights: Fumbling around the elephant](#) or Sonia Corrêa (2016) “Brazilian Response to HIV in Troubled and Uncertain Times” [in Myth Vs. Reality- Evaluating the Brazilian Response to HIV in 2016](#)

⁵ This essay would not have been possible if it was not for the above cited findings resulting from the research of newly emerged far –right formations in Brazil, conducted by Isabela Oliveira Kalil and her group (at the Fundação Escola de Sociologia e Política de São Paulo).

⁶ See, David Leonhard’s [article on Hungary](#) at the NYT.

⁷ In Mbembe own words: *“Financial capital has achieved its hegemony over the world by annexing the core of human desires and, in the process, by turning itself into the first global secular theology. Fusing the attributes of a technology and a religion, it relied on uncontested dogmas modern forms of capitalism had reluctantly shared with democracy since the post-war period — individual liberty, market competition and the rule of the commodity and of property, the cult of science, technology and reason...At its core, liberal democracy is not compatible with the inner logic of finance capitalism.*

⁸ See Eliane Brum’s article in El País ([in Portuguese](#))

⁹ Wendy Brown (2006) “American Nightmare”, in [Political Theory](#) 34 (6):690-714 (2006)

¹⁰ Members of the Socialist Party in France, grass- root left-wing groups in Italy and the ex-President Rafael Corrêa who was the first high level politician to publicly attack “gender ideology” in 2013 in the weekly TV program where he had direct interactions with the audience.

¹¹ Constraints may also hamper Bolsonaro’s public security agenda, because some of its items such as less restrictions on gun control will require not so easy legislative reforms, he proposes, as expansion of incarceration, will be judicially contested.

¹² The *Manifesto to the Nation: Brazil for Brazilians* comprises the following proposals for the next administration. Amongst other priorities, the guidelines for education state that policies must focus on technology development, be based on “merit” and the principles of the Judeo-Christian civilizational. The document supports the proposals of “school without party” movement and the prohibition “gender ideology in the public education system. It also supports the downsizing of public universities and research as to channel resources to universal basic and technical education.

¹³ See [Brazil: Education and Gender under attack](#)