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Extreme-right, democracy and oligarchy

Brazil in the global context

Extrema-direita, democracia e oligarquia

Brasil no contexto global

Abstract

This article places the Brazilian Bolsonaro government in comparative perspective, particularly in what refers to the surge and strengthening of extreme-right globally. It discusses the emergence of a new sort of political regime (*advanced liberal oligarchy*) within a more general analysis of modern political regimes (in particular liberal democracy and its crisis, fascism and bureaucratic authoritarianism), the eruption of popular mobilization since 2013 in the country (as part of a global trend), the crisis of the left and how unexpectedly an extreme-right political movement came to power in Brazil. The article then analyses the Bolsonaro government in greater detail, its right-wing posture and its relation to liberal democracy and its largely oligarchic elements, as well as moves by the opposition.

Keywords

Politics, Democracy, Oligarchy, Brazil.

Resumo

Este artigo põe o governo Bolsonaro no Brasil em perspectiva comparada, em particular no que se refere relançamento e fortalecimento da extrema-direita globalmente. Ele discute a emergência de um novo tipo de regime (a *oligarquia liberal avançada*) nos quadros de uma análise mais ampla dos regimes políticos modernos (em particular a democracia liberal e sua crise, o fascismo e o autoritarismo burocrático), da erupção da mobilização popular desde 2013 no país (como parte de uma tendência global), da crise da esquerda e de como de forma inesperada um movimento político de extrema-direita chegou ao poder no Brasil. O artigo então analisa o governo Bolsonaro em detalhe, sua postura de direita e relações com a democracia liberal e seus elementos em larga medida oligárquicos, bem como dos movimentos da oposição.

Palavras Chave

Política, Democracia, Oligarquia, Brasil.

Introduction

It might be, to some considerable measure, correct, though it might sound somewhat false to say, that a spectre has been travelling around the world and that this is the spectre of the extreme-right, in its diverse incarnations. It would not be entirely correct because there is another spectre spooking and enchanting modern society. This is the spectre of democracy. The former often pretends to be anti-elitist, which is actually a lie; the second is truly opposed, however confuse it may sometimes be, to the oligarchic elements of liberal democracy, which have been strengthened in the last decades.

My proposal in this paper is to consider these aspects in order to have a broader picture of what is happening across the world. Such analytical balance surely does not exhaust the contemporary political dynamic, neither geographically (since it does not engage with the remnants of “real socialism,” or authoritarian collectivism, indeed) nor, even where applicable, can it account for all features of political life. Yet I believe it captures a lot. I shall start where things empirically start: the oligarchic state of contemporary political systems, which do not in any case eliminate their democratic features. Those oligarchic aspects linked directly to social inequalities and economic power. This is true but does not properly frame the characteristics and situation of modern political systems in their specific imaginary and institutional moorings. I will try to reverse this by shifting emphases. Then I will tackle right-wing movements and parties, sweepingly, trying to bring out some of their common features. Many researchers have done this in greater empirical detail, so I can be briefer and more theory-oriented. I shall briefly consider whether the present coronavirus sanitary crisis is harming these extreme-right currents. A subsequent section will deal directly with the Brazilian case.

Finally, I will turn to democratic movements that have spread out across the globe. Just too frequently have they been interpreted as reactions to “neoliberalism” and social inequality. Instead, I will deal with them as to a large, or larger extent, connected to a reaction to societal changes as well as to the state of political systems today, without detriment to issues related to neoliberalism, loss of rights and, more generally, the retraction of liberalism from its expansive moment, when democracy and a widening of rights took place. The interplay between right-wing currents, democratic dynamics and left-wing responses (or lack there of) will close my argument.

Democracy and oligarchy

For a long time, traditional classifications of political regimes were abandoned by political analysis. While **democracy** has featured steadily in discussions, **autocracies** are rarely mentioned, the same accruing to **oligarchy**. It is as though the former was *the* sort of political regime characteristic of modernity. All others (and they have been varied) were only temporary fixes that would, in modernization theory style, up until now, eventually disappear. Dahl (1960) even preferred a more modest definition: **poliarchy**, in which the government of the many, but not exactly of every citizen, the *demos*, would be in point. Autocracies (the rule of the one) was also a transitory phenomenon, typical of Africa, **communism**, perhaps **populism**, with **fascism** constituting a peculiar regime, which was to a good extent a regression *vis-à-vis* modern democracy. Oligarchies, in turn, were merely those regimes which would, due to modernization, be superseded and succeeded by democracy, therefore wane for good once modernity is established. The only ones to keep an eye on things similar to oligarchy were “elite” theorists, yet they either assumed this was a universal phenomenon or reckoned it was intrinsic to democracy tout court, from which there would be no escape (Mosca, [1895] 1923; Pareto, [1916] 1923; Schumpeter, [1943] 1994).

The fact is, however, that liberal (or “representative”) democracy is as such necessarily what the ancients (as well as Montesquieu and the American *framers of the constitution*) considered a **mixed regime** (a republic with *representative government*, as Mills would later put it, only partly a democracy, with the people always checked by an *aristocracy of the spirit* or the like). If on the one side there is popular participation and contestation, whereas elections imply some level of popular sovereignty in liberal democracy, there is also oligarchy, since a closed and small circle of powerful people control the political process. Finally, it may also include some autocratic features, hence, while not monarchical, as usually in older, pre-modern regimes, it includes features of the rule of the one. Besides, there is no reason to think that liberal democracy is *the* regime that quintessentially characterises modernity. There are other possibilities, to which I shall return below, such as fascism, Bonapartism, bureaucratic authoritarianism, autocracy, as well as oligarchies, of which two variants may be identified: traditional liberal oligarchy and advanced liberal oligarchy. For the latter, we may also sketch a partly dovetailed picture.

As stated above, liberal representative democracy has two aspects, even in the best of cases. This is inevitable insofar as there is a caesura between those down below and those up the top¹. These tend to form close-knit groups, *concerned with their own power*, even -and often even more so, since this is their only source of power: the party or state machine- in the case of left-wing politicians. Even when those popular participatory elements, which can be radicalized indeed, are present, the “elitist” element persists, as an intrinsic part of the separation produced by the modern political system, even in relation to the organized parts of the societal political system (so-called *civil society*). This is especially true regarding the citizenry as a whole, taken as individualized and, to a large extent, atomized *plebeians*, in the political sense, which increasingly feel excluded from political processes and pit themselves against political oligarchies (Domingues, 2019a, 2019b).

At this point we need to take stock of an older discussion. Usually, oligarchies were understood as being characterized by the merger of state power and wealth (Aristotle, 1996). Some recent literature has emerged that recovers the concept of oligarchy in a similar vein (Winters, 2011). While this is to some extent true (and crystal-clear in countries such as Brazil and the United States) we need to acknowledge that in modernity there has been a differentiation of the political dimension from the rest of social life, likewise the economic (capitalist) dimension. This applies even in the relation between the political system in its state-based aspect with respect to the state overall. We therefore need to look at oligarchies in terms of their political power as such, not merely as an expression of **plutocracy**, that is, the domain of highly moneyed people. If banks, finance capital more broadly, have great influence upon politicians, these have their own career paths and power resources, operate in important sectors of the state, taking decisions that are usually not directly conditioned by economic interests, even though it is true that the general economic dynamic may set limits to and spur politicians towards specific directions and choices (Offe, [1972] 1973). Yet this is not automatic. We should not exonerate politicians for their choices and political decisions as though they were basically powerless, as well as directly connected to or dependent upon capitalists (Streek, 2013). Nor should we think of them as if there was a specialized subsystem that has its own particular logic, from which there is no escape (Habermas, 1981; Luhmann, 2010), given that ethical and political choices are always available somehow. Bureaucrats also, as we see them in the European Union or in Peru, can hold a lot of power, regardless of what political systems strictly defined decide and do. In sum, there are variations in how oligarchic power in liberal democracies is organized, but in all cases political, as well as ethical, choices cannot be taken lightly, as if economic power or systemic logics explained political behaviour.

¹ Even when its normative radicalization is suggested (as in Urbinati, 2014), the *caesura* does not disappear.

If liberal democracies are mixed in terms of how they fit into a classification of regimes, their democratic side can be more or less strong. There was, during the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, a *democratizing trend* within liberal democracy. The traditional oligarchic regime was left behind, with its restricted franchise, absolute control of the agenda by the old oligarchy (landed still, to a good extent), restricted state activity and denial of political and social rights for the majority (working-class people, women, blacks and minorities). There was therefore an expansive moment for liberalism and liberal democracy, in which also social rights came to the fore. At the end of the twentieth century, however, we witnessed the beginnings of an involution of liberal democracy, that is to say, a process of *de-democratization*. We have now possibly entered what I have called a new sort of regime, or are in train of getting there, unless democratic mobilizations pushed political life in another direction: *advanced liberal oligarchy*. This regime allows for some room for debate (contestation), we all can vote, the public agenda is supposedly up to grabs, but nothing of this seems to really matter. To be sure, some developments, from Turkey, through India, Hungary and Poland, to Brazil, let alone Russia, seem to suggest that such sort of regime can be tougher and much less liberal. Whereas western Europe and the United States possess a liberal framework and infrastructure that resists the encroachments of extreme-right forces, other areas and countries evince a weaker liberal background and may develop into a less liberal sort of oligarchy. We could thus say that we need a twofold classification of advanced liberal oligarchies, 1 and 2, the former more liberal, the latter, more repressive and less liberal, though overall vigilance and police repression are spreading across modern societies and mobilizing state devices. Or rather, we should think of it as possibly a *continuum* within this sort of regime. It is important to stress that this is not a sort of **state of exception** within liberal democracy (Agamben, 2003) -an oxymoron if we suppose it is a permanent regime-, as too often we see argued, it is instead a new sort of political regime. In practice, however, at least in Brazilian case this consists merely in theoretical hypothesis, since the traditional oligarchic sectors have shown how much control they exert over the political system, probably discarding that second possibility, which would please especially the present president, Jair Bolsonaro. A more consistent extreme-right turn seems to be temporarily blocked, which does not mean that the regime cannot become more authoritarian.

In order to grasp how we have got there we need, however, to understand the disappointments of most people today as well as the role of such extreme-right forces in relation to democracy and often as protest movements.

The contemporary emergence of the extreme-right

There are many ways to look into the new movements and governments characterized by extreme-right features. Some views would simply affirm a continuity between twentieth century fascism (and even Latin American and southern European military regimes) and new movements and governments. This has not been however well-argued and what we do find is usually a more systematic refusal to simply accept a direct link between them, although there are obvious lines of continuity (Traverso, 2017). In any case, neither these movements nor regimes can be easily fit into the fascist model: neither is their mass basis the petty bourgeoisie, nor even the statist and economic nationalist character of fascism is there to be seen (Mann, 2004; Poulantzas, [1970] 1974; Paxton, 2004). To be sure, nationalism, as against foreigners and especially against Muslims -and sometimes Jews-, comes up time and again in Europe, while a xenophobic atmosphere

can be found also in movements elsewhere, with the Muslim trope remaining prominent. Neoliberalism is, on the other hand, present in several of such movements which can be, at times, concerned with the well-being of the working classes and the re-built of some sort of Welfare State that would care exclusively for “nationals” but reach out to those left out among them. There is no homogeneity in this respect.

Another way of looking at them is through the lens of populism (Diehl, 2001; Mudde, 2010). The problem is that this is such an elusive definition that it is even difficult to take stock of, and even more apply it properly to, a specific case. There is so much variation in the concept and in the correspondence between it and reality that drawing upon any of its variants in my view simply just does not pay off. To be sure, demagoguery is a feature of extreme-right discourses, but this is not a characteristic that only belongs to them. At the same time, irrationalism, fake news, the lack of commitment to truth, some sort of putative Gramscian strategy to wage *cultural wars* as well as a damning good way to use the internet and social media have been distinguished features of such movements, which have enlisted a significant amount of militancy (Metz & Seelen, 2018; Taguief, 2012; Boltanski & Esquerre, 2014; Nagle, 2017; Herman & Muldoon, 2019).

More promising seems to be the definition of the extreme-right of the present as a *protest movement* or, even more broadly, as a regressive sort of social movement, although some people may simply deeply believe in their values and proposals. Yet against neo-liberalism and social exclusion, with the shaming inequalities that do not stop to grow in the late decades across the planet, allegiance to such movements may stem from understandable grounds but in any case would be an inappropriate and reactionary answer to the feelings of abandonment experienced today by so many working-class people as well as by part of the middle-classes (Heitmeyer, 2018; Koppetsch, 2019). They are, nevertheless, we can add, also a protest against the increasing oligarchization of political systems, the slow but relentless construction of advanced liberal oligarchy (in which parts of the upper middle classes and evidently the rich are doing very well). Feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness are then answered with the worse modern societies and human beings in general can produce: exclusivism, selfishness and prejudice, whereby *reembeddings* of *disembedded* people -processes typical of modernity- assume defensive and frequently horrendous features, landing them in right-wing identities and at least the occasional choice of reactionary, anti-egalitarian and anti-freedom politics².

It is interesting to note that, like climate change, regarding which this extreme-rights currents have mostly adopted a sort of denial (Forchtner, 2019), the present sanitary crisis linked to the coronavirus and the related disease Covid-19 has elicited responses from these same groupings which either denied or minimized its threat. Some doubt whether this will damage them, but we can hypothesize that this is likely: as we will see, in Brazil this has been the case. While climate change is something more difficult to grasp and other explanations can be offered in opposition to anthropocentric action, allowing for some sort of *flat-earth mentality*, the coronavirus pandemic has an explicit and immediately devastating death toll, which mixes in complex ways an ensuing economic crisis, yet cannot, in any case, be dismissed as something of no importance. Hence, the likely damage to extreme-right currents, especially in the Americas, for bad responses, or lack thereof, although they will certainly fight back (while it is true that in places like Poland and Hungary extreme-right governments have already made more and explicit anti-democratic moves) (Burchard, Roberts, Moens & De La Baume, 2020; Mudde, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2020).

Of course, those extreme-right forces are neither democratic nor democratizing, pace their demagogic rhetoric: on the contrary, they can be agents that further the deepening

² We can speak here of *deleterious and self-canceling dialectic of freedom*.

oligarchization of contemporary political systems and may also shield capitalists, big corporations and finance capital as well as the well-off. Note however that, as Trotsky ([1932] 2007:19-20) realized in the 1930s, these movements have, at least to a large extent, a plebeian character (although people from the upper classes are surely involved), discursively posited against the rich and powerful, traditional party leadership and the like. Again, especially when in power, they do not necessarily pursue policies that favour working classes, the poor and plebeians.

Often, a highly personalistic sort of politics is played out by the extreme-right. Actually, personalization is a characteristic that pervades liberal political systems. Whereas liberal aspirations ideally evacuated modern political systems of the personal elements associated with the *rule of the one* (such as in European absolutism) in practice, some level of personalization, sometimes very high, never disappeared. Concreteness (which returns in the development of the modern political dimension) re-emerges with a vengeance also within political systems themselves, as we have known at least since Marx's discussion of Bonapartism (Marx, [1852] 1960; Domingues, 2019b). *Populism* expresses this very directly (but then too much has to be brought into this vague concept, from Perón to Thatcher and beyond) (Germani, 1965; Hall, 1988). Not all extreme-right movements count and/or bet on that, but a few do. All things considered, such movements have moreover not broken with liberal political systems, although they may attack some elements of the liberal infrastructure, including aspects of the law, and of liberal democracy, searching for legitimation on the basis of what Schmitt ([1928] 1993:204-220) defined as representation through direct *identification*, in a sort of plebiscitary mechanism (which would not need to be specified). The closure of the political system, with a combination of the rule of the few and of the one, under the disguise of the rule of many, may be -and has been- established or reinforced, with money playing an important role in the tortuous (s)election of rulers by the ruled in some instances.

Finally, let me bring up Adorno's ([1967] 2019) lecture on the spectre of *right wing extremist*, a politically shrewd piece and unfortunately still valid today, although some adjustments in his marxist framework are necessary. In a sense, we could look backwards and say that he had summed up what these those many analysts have disassembled today. Adorno notes, resuming Marx's discussion of developmental trends (**Tendenzen**), that such currents stem from the concentration of capital and the relative impoverishment of several social layers and the foreseeable "catastrophic breakdown" (**Zusammenbruch**) of capitalism (the petty bourgeoisie included, but not only, in the 1960s likewise the past) as well as of the blockage of democracy, which remains purely formal. It means that people are threatened but have no options to overcome this predicament. The problem is that a sort of psychological, unconscious *displacement* comes about. Right extremism is based on propaganda -as the ultimate privileging of means in relation to ends, which would become empty and irrelevant-, as well as on stupid and simple, but exhaustively repeated ideas. These get hardened the more implausible they become (again, this implausibility is *repressed* through some sort of not mentioned psychological mechanism). Right-wing extremism is demagogic and false in relation to democracy, which it hates, alongside intellectuals and reason, Jews and whatever escapes the nation-state, something that could not work already by then and, exactly because of that, becomes fetishized (though I must stress that Adorno did not at all grasp the emancipatory push of nationalism in the periphery). Communists, which were not such a strong possibility in the 1920s-1930s in Germany and by the time he gave his lecture meant nothing in the Federal Republic in the 1960s, were also a sort of a scapegoat for such twisted perspectives. Such ideology contains elements of truth, which become false due to their entan-

glement with absurdities. While the breakdown of capitalism is unlikely to come about, at least the way Adorno seems to suggest, there is little in his statements that would not apply to contemporary societies, especially the malaise and personal insecurity that be-devils almost every single soul today.

Can we speak, beyond authoritarian inclinations, and sometimes assaults against the liberal institutional framework, of a new sort of regime? I doubt that: it is rather a disguised form of advanced oligarchy that has come into play, whether rather *undemocratic liberal* or tendentially *illiberal*, as some may argue (Mounk, 2018). In other words, while the extreme-right may have to grapple with more deeply entrenched liberal systems, it may find room for less liberal strategies, which they are keen to further in an authoritarian way, beyond the imaginary and discourse, hence changing institutional elements of the state and the law, as well as influencing society at large. When and whether we cannot speak of even advanced liberal oligarchies is an open question, to start with Russia since the 1990s, where liberal democracy has never set roots, even though we can hardly point to a dictatorial regime there, despite the role of vigilance and repression, as well as of personalization and strong autocratic features.

In Latin America, where, in spite of the democratic push of the 1980s-2000s, oligarchic features of political systems, often strongly coupled with widespread state neopatrimonial elements, stand out, the problem is not different, even when left-wing forces have come to power (and have tried to perpetuate themselves there, with recourse also to a radical personalization of politics). This does not mean that there are no opposing tendencies and trends at work. But especially in the case of Brazil a fierce right-wing government has come to the helm of the state. This has understandably awakened fears of a return to the not very distant past. Let us examine which past this is and what are the conditions of the country today, in order to assess which are the developmental possibilities in the political dimension.

The Brazil of Bolsonaro

The election of Jair Bolsonaro, a low level and extreme-right legislator, a fan of the military dictatorship, openly fascist, misogynist, racist and anti-communist, in the middle of a prolonged crisis of the Brazilian political system and society, has come as a shock to those that until very close to the end of the first round of the presidential election found it basically impossible to happen. His personal loose ideology and the amalgam derived from his alliances are a mix of the old right-wing, anti-communist perspectives of the military dictatorship he so much admires, the new global extreme-right irrationalism and the evangelical conservatism that made such powerful inroads in Brazilian society in the last decades, with its traditional family and heteronormative values, combined with a law and order agenda and the adoption of social and economic neoliberal policies. Because of the radicalism of his discourse and its very sectional appeal, it seemed unlikely that he could win the elections, actually until the last months of the campaign. Many, like myself, thought the oligarchic groups that control the political system would be capable of holding the levers of power due to the reforms that strengthened their hands with lots of state money (once the **Supreme Federal Tribunal -STF-** prohibited private company money was used in electoral campaigns) and television time for electoral propaganda. The disgust of the Brazilian population against politicians found its way into the up to then unlikely victory of Bolsonaro, whose occasional party of choice (the **Social Liberal Party -PSL-**) was basically inexistence until that moment.

Bolsonaro drew upon the usual receipt of right-wing forces across the globe as of lately: intensive use of social media (illegally to a large extent, with lots of robots outside the country) and fake news, with a discourse very much against the left and the **Workers' Party (PT)**, as well as the support of the US extreme-right (including Steve Bannon) (Solano Gallego, 2019). Lower-rank officers in the armed forces pushed their superiors towards Bolsonaro and he enjoyed concentrated evangelical support, while voting across classes, with a predominance of the well-off and in the South and Southeast, guaranteed his electoral majority. Yet, to reduce Bolsonaro's victory to his communication strategy or to a supposed anti-poor bias, and above all to the use of fake news, as the PT oligarchic ruling group does, including seemingly Lula da Silva, is really disingenuous. It entirely misses the point and opens room for subsequent defeats in the years to come.

The crisis of the political system started in 2013, when massive demonstrations, which brought together, implying also conflicts, people of all political persuasions, while too many social demands went on unmet after more than a decade of centre-left governments. It expanded relentlessly afterwards (Domingues, 2015 and 2017; Carvalho, 2018). The revelation of far-reaching corruption schemes by the most important political forces, from the centre-right, centre and centre-left then wrought havoc, with the judiciary -through the *Car-Wash operation*- performing in a sort of bonapartist way. Prosecutors and judges took advantage of and contributed to the deepening political crisis and the in-fighting of the political oligarchies, traditional and new alike (the PT's machine had by this time taken an entrenched taste for power, its props and perks), which were at each other's throat in a factional way typical of oligarchic political systems. Meanwhile the economic crisis that gained traction in 2015, especially after Dilma Rousseff betrayed her electoral promises and adopted recessive policies, which, along with the desperation of politicians for someone that would help them get off the hook, led to her impeachment, on (at best) very dubious legal premises and partly in a revengeful mood. Her impeachment represented a parliamentary coup by congresspeople in search of self-protection against the advances of the *Car Wash (Lava-Jato)* judiciary operations against corruption. It was eventually supported by business, which already wanted the implementation of a radical neoliberal agenda (Domingues, 2017).

Lula da Silva, the former president, who had become the fiduciary authority of the political system, with its corrupted schemes, simultaneously with being the most popular politician in the country among the poor, was jailed (though it is doubtful whether he would be capable of getting elected as his supporters claim). In turn, the Party of the Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB), for two decades already a neoliberal, faintly social liberal centre-right formation, was even more profoundly affected by the corruption scandals than even the in practice more social liberal PT, its main contender from the 1990s to the mid-2010s. Finally, the centrist and extremely patrimonialist **Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB)**, to which the vicepresident Michel Temer belonged, and who took over after Rousseff's fall and is now being prosecuted- was overwhelmed, alongside similar parties to the centre and centre-right of the political spectrum, by the same succession of corruption scandals. This was the window that allowed for Bolsonaro's victory, after he was unexpectedly stabbed by a crazy man with a left-wing background.

It is necessary here to pause for a moment to reconsider and elaborate on the notion of political system adumbrated above (see, again, Domingues, 2019a & 2019b). It has two sides, a state-based and societal one. While the mediation between the population and the state political system, through in part the societal political system, is surely very important, their own internal dynamics, especially that of the state political system, must

be accounted for. Therein lies, to a large extent, the oligarchic character of the system, which frequently blocks off even the participation of those who take part in the societal political system, let alone the population as a whole. This is what underwent such a deep crisis. Formerly the armed forces played Pretorian roles, in Latin America as elsewhere in the world (Marx, [1852] 1960 & Huntington [1968] 2006, 4, 47–50, 79), but now the judiciary partly assumed this role, inspired also by the *Italian Mani Pulite* operation, further propelling the crisis of the political system of which it had in the first place taken advantage to push through its anti-corruption agenda. Many have attempted to explain the downfall of Rousseff and the judiciary procedures that led Lula da Silva to prison mentioning supposed conspiracies by US imperialism, the desire to take over the Brazilian pre-Sal oil and similar things, as well as the putative hatred of the rich and particularly the middle classes of the poor. Although, however, they have been especially tough with the PT and the upper-echelons of the judiciary have clearly been protecting centre-right politicians (but also, when possible, PT's Congressmen and women), it is patently the impossibility of keeping the usual workings of the political system, in the face of multifaceted and pervasive popular dissatisfaction, that has led to the disorganization of the system. If Bolsonaro was never an outsider, his subaltern position within the political system lent credibility to his claim of not being part of it, alongside his clearly plebeian background and carefully crafted discourse. This was just a natural successor to Lula's poor man's personal outlook and public demeanour. His share of the electorate in 2018 largely demonstrates this, with a powerful show in the periphery of the big cities, where the Evangelical churches are extremely strong, although he was initially less popular in the northeast and with blacks and women and in the southeast, with his supporters showing some less commitment to democracy (Tavares de Almeida & Guarnieri, 2020; Cardoso, 2020; Nicolau, 2020).

As pointed out, personally Bolsonaro could be easily deemed a fascist, Brazilian style, with solid connections with the most right-wing elements (the “mad dogs”, so to speak) of the military dictatorship, torturers and others of their ilk. Therefore, the state and the armed forces (usually almost nothing of a fascist movement) play a key role in this perspective. Moreover, he and his politically active sons -fundamental in his broader movement at present- entertain close links with the global right but also with the criminal militias that plague Rio de Janeiro. These are made up of policemen (though firemen play a part in it too) who exploit, prostitution, gambling, illegal cable TV, gas, drugs and many other activities, including the killing of “unwanted” elements and of their “enemies” (drug dealers particularly, whose territory they want to take over). Among the former, for still obscure reasons, we find the murdered councilwoman Marielle Franco. Yet Bolsonaro's government is not a fascist one, though he would surely like to get rid of the democratic features of Brazilian liberal democracy and introduce a sort of revised authoritarian regime, with open autocratic features. Let us look a bit more closely into that.

The 1960s-1980s were characterized in Brazil, as much as in other South Cone countries of the Latin America, by what O'Donnell (1973, 1982) defined as an **authoritarian bureaucratic regime** at the centre of which was the army, though businessmen had a crucial role in it too. We can say it had fascist features (especially regarding the role of the political police), but it was mainly the bureaucratic structure of the armed forces that served as its organizational pillar, while anti-communism lied at the core of its ideology. Is there a possibility of Brazil returning to such a regime? I think this is very unlikely. What is possible -though the present general crisis makes it less likely or sustainable- is the development of what I have defined as **advanced liberal oligarchy**

2: most of the explicit elements of the liberal infrastructure remain in place, elections are held, public debate may be more or less open, but repression, surveillance, some censorship and more generally authoritarianism unfold, supported by extreme-right activity in social media, alongside neoliberal reforms, which are demanded especially by finance capital but also by the upper classes in general, including the liberal press and liberal politicians (like Rodrigo Maia, of **Democrats -DEM-**, a centre-right party, who was during the years 2019-2020 president of chamber of deputies and played an absolutely instrumental part in passing many key reforms, though he also opposes Bolsonaro's more authoritarian moves).

Right now, Brazil does not have a completely extreme-right government, Bolsonaro's moves have been blocked, but if consolidated he may turn it into that, strengthening the most oligarchic and repressive features of advanced liberal oligarchy. Actually, this looks much more like the frustrated *project of self-reformation* of the military regime in the 1980s, before its defeat, than like a return to the past. We must add to this the even more extreme conservatism, in terms of mores, of evangelical (especially Pentecostal) churches in Brazil (likewise in the US) and the irrationalism of putative intellectuals (such as the bizarre Olavo de Carvalho) who got to the point of embracing the flat earth trope (though surely the smartest of them play a game using this with others who are truly the fools). Very central for the government (mirroring the Philippines) is also the law-and-order approach (generally and in particular *vis-à-vis* corruption, despite serious inconsistencies when it comes to Bolsonaro's sons and the government) of which Justice Minister Sérgio Moro, the popular *Car Wash* judge, is the main expression. Tough on crime and soft with guns and violence against criminals: this is a widespread perspective in Brazil today, including among the poor, who seem to be tired of criminality. Note in particular that order and state legitimacy are very dear to the military (a topic in which Rosenfield (2018) is an argumentative right-wing exponent) with the Bolsonaro government purportedly standing up for them.

Besides, in order for Brazil to jump into a regime change oriented towards a bureaucratic authoritarian, let alone a fascist regime stout social support would be needed as well as that of the army. This does not exist, as it became clear in the course of 2020, though he has, with a military crisis in May 2021, advanced over its command, which he substituted. It is true that there is now an open and vociferous extreme-right in Brazil. Also true is Bolsonaro's support by around 30 percent of the electorate (always polarizing the political process and working hard to keep this level of backing) and that the armed forces maintain now a strong dislike of the left. At the same time, until at least the beginning of 2020, Bolsonaro tried to rule by sowing chaos, through provocations and a permanent sort of campaign, in order to keep his amount of support firm, though it is also clear that as to governing he has a much more destructive plan in mind (Nobre, 2019). This is however as yet not the same as a clear support for regime change, a so-called self-coup. Business, which largely upheld Bolsonaro and carries on upholding his economic agenda, is likewise unlikely to back such sort of adventure. This is bound to end up badly and, in any case, would be very costly, especially at the global level, for the country. Actually, there seems to be no reason for such a disruptive move. Besides, now controlled by the centre-right, Congress is doing a good job in what regards further neoliberal reforms.

In sum, if politics has its own dynamic and must be analyzed in partial independence from other social processes, concretely this is only relative, though it must never be treated as a dependent variable. Bear in mind furthermore that, although this is a neoliberal government in many respects, Bolsonaro had never been associated to this credo. He

³ Recall that the *equity* (actually anti-egalitarian) logic of such programmes was actually inaugurated by Pinochet's dictatorship (Rodríguez, 2016).

can change his tack and, if in particular labour law and retirement schemes have become much worse for workers, social liberalism, as we can see with recent developments of the Bolsa Familia cash transfer scheme, remains in place and might even turn to be more encompassing in order to propel his popularity and try to erase the left³.

All this said, it was clear that in the beginning of 2020 Bolsonaro was not doing bad. His strategy of polarization seemed to work and, although the economy did not take off, it was not as bad. Bolsonaro was then hit by the coronavirus crisis, with its attendant health and economic implications (see Domingues, 2021). He fought against *social distancing*, defended by his health minister and all governors in the country. He dragged his feet until accepting the need to hand out cash to informal workers and workers unemployed or with partial salary reduction as well as to business, while his extremely neoliberal minister (Paulo Guedes) tried to deny the depth of impending crisis. Denial of science, a concern with an economic recession which might (two years later, in 2022) prevent his re-election and an imitation of Donald Trump's initial negative response to coronavirus guided Bolsonaro to a deadlock from which he decided not to try to escape. Losing popularity, he fired the minister while of health and, because the investigation of his sons by the Federal Police, Moro clashed with him over the forced change of its head, leading to a further fall of rates of approval (although Moro himself has dodged the recognition of the crimes committed by Bolsonaro and his sons). While a typical extreme-right perspective on science came to the fore in his positioning, a crude and callous sort of not only economic but also biological Darwinism (the weak die and life carries on) surfaced too, along with a shallow military mentality (in all wars there are casualties).

Talk of impeachment has become widespread and it has indeed for the first time a real possibility. Instead of searching for accommodation, Bolsonaro has however more openly attacked Congress and the STF, radicalizing political conflict. At the same time, he decided to strike a deal with the *centrão* (the *big centre*) in Congress, a usually corrupt group of politicians, who have been regularly involved in brutal scandals, while his economy minister resists the emergency Keynesianism the crisis has globally elicited. The political crisis is certain to keep developing and mounting. It has become harder for Bolsonaro to finish his government, whereas fascist groups have been organizing in society and it is not totally clear whether the armed forces, always evoked by Bolsonaro, would support him if push comes to shove, though they would more likely remain neutral.

But Bolsonaro blinked earlier than the others. Due to the reaction of the armed forces, making it clear that they would not be involved in his defence, the pressure of the dominant oligarchies, the international rejection, the loss of popularity, the threat of investigations of his sons, the possibility of his presidential ticket being invalidated in the **Superior Electoral Court (TSE)**, Bolsonaro gave in. Faced with impeachment or the invalidation of his mandate due to the massive use of fake news on *WhatsApp* and the like, he was forced to adapt to traditional liberal oligarchy schemes, albeit unwillingly. He then got rid of more problematic ministers, changed some strategic policies (especially in relation to the Amazon region), accepted to see his most strident supporters being arrested and set aside his provocations. Finally, the liberal oligarchic system in its most traditional sense (advanced liberal oligarchy 1) therefore prevailed. If Bolsonaro resumes his former strength and is elected for a second term, we can return to the possibility of seeing a more authoritarian and repressive model (advanced liberal oligarchy 2) re-emerge, especially since his popularity has somewhat, though unstably, improved. For the time being this seems at least on hold. Developments are in any case still open, despite the ongoing strengthening of its information system. Bolsonaro focuses on the establishment larger cash transfer programme, which replaces the emergen-

cy aid and the *Bolsa Família* itself, though his desired *Renda Brasil* programme did not move forward, as well as surreptitiously on a public works programme that breaches the infamous spending ceiling, introduced during Temer's presidency, which guarantees taxation and the rentist extraction of resources. He aims to boost his re-election thereby. Very clearly, a competition for the vote of the "poor" has been established, which engages the whole political spectre, regardless of ideological colours. They were seemingly abandoned, but, due to the difficult situation of the country in the next few years, it is unlikely they will not return.

Bolsonaro's popularity has wavered, as it did in the first months of 2020 due to the worsening of the sanitary and economic situation, without emergency cash for a few months. This does not mean that he is no longer a main competitor in the 2022 elections, especially since the emergency cash has now returned and the pandemic is most likely to be under control and economic growth return in 2022. Moreover, if Bolsonaro loses these elections he will surely denounce an inexistent fraud and will not leave power peacefully.

This leads us to a discussion of what we can expect of the democratic opposition, including the role of a social agenda. We need in addition to go further and inquire into the other social and political elements that have been fast developing in Brazilian society and may lead to a renewal of democracy and democratic thinking.

Democracy, opposition and the future of Brazil (and of the world)

Opposition to Bolsonaro had thus far been largely ineffective. He seemed to become stronger and stronger. This has not yet been discarded, but if it occurs it will be in another register.

Students and university professors took to the streets in 2019 and conservative liberals (many of whom supported Bolsonaro in the second round of the 2018 elections) resisted his advances, along with the press with a similar doctrinal angle, blocking some of his excesses, while the latter have also supported his neoliberal reforms. The left has courageous parliamentarians, who have played an important role in denouncing and articulating resistance against Bolsonaro. But unions and similar left movements are paralyzed. The very strategy of democratic forces and, especially, of the left against the degradation of liberal democracy in Brazil has not been consensual. Some have argued for a democratic front against Bolsonaro's "fascist" or at least "authoritarian" plans. Others prefer to bet on a narrower left front. Finally, especially since he left prison, Lula da Silva and most of the PT have emphasized their usual choice: to be the absolute *protagonists* of politics in general and, particularly, of electoral processes, as if nothing new was happening in Brazil and in the world. The centre, for its part, was seriously injured in the 2018 elections and is still in its initial efforts to reorganize itself. It is gradually re-emerging. The main issue for the left, despite Bolsonaro's thus far changed position, remains the same: how to assemble a democratic front against the extreme-right, although the left is unlikely to profit from it in the short or even the medium-run. At this point Brazil suffers under a mix of extreme-right government and oligarchic politics. While, therefore, keeping the democratic front is crucial for left politics, at the same time a more radical democratic and socially-oriented programme must also be put forward by the left, in itself plural, so that it keeps its identity and has its proper agenda in this case against the liberal opposition, which in this regard often sides with Bolsonaro. Overlapping systems of alliance are required in this regard, although the Left is rather lost and practically blocked, as well as very divided.

Other processes have been however developing, which most politicians and even intellectuals have enormous difficulty to grasp. To some extent in Latin America, it started in 2001 in Argentina with its *que se vayan todos*, but its landmark was the 2013 demonstrations, a true explosion, in Brazil (Domingues, 2015). Since then, eruptions of citizens dissatisfied and disgusted with the political system have been regular across the subcontinent, likewise other regions of the globe. This includes those in which the target may be the left, as in Bolivia, with the disrespect for the Constitution showed by Evo Morales and his party and subsequent straightforward electoral fraud, or in Chile, against the whole political system, both in 2019. Usually, people want to read a rejection pure and simple of neoliberalism in such demonstrations and insurrections, something maybe truer in some cases, for instance in Ecuador, also in 2019 and partly obviously in the Chilean case (but as well in 2013 Brazil *vis-à-vis* the weak social liberal reformism of Lula da Silva and Rousseff).

Yet the main and direct target has been the oligarchic character of state political systems (that may extend into the societal political system in particular if left parties colonize it through prebendal offers and interventionist moves to secure control and support) and the exclusion of citizens from political processes as well as from the often-sumptuous settings and workings of the system. Social autonomization of agents, with the disappearance or weakening of the mediating forces that were paradoxically linked to democratization, though they were themselves rather oligarchic (such as unions and other movements), has led to this transformed situation (Domingues, 2019a). There is no way back from it. Individualized mass social media has been also playing a key part in the furthering of this social fluidity and new forms of mobilization.

This sort of mass mobilization may re-emerge in Brazil at any moment, although it looks unlikely at this precise point, especially since an increasingly extreme-right government furnishes the focus of political struggle. In the long run, this is a plebeian promise of democratization, regardless of whether such moves are capable of breaking through the armature of the political system, something which the 2013 explosions failed to achieve. It is not a matter of absolutizing it, since without parties and the like it is impossible to operate especially in the state political system. It is important however to democratize these parties, still in the course of the resistance against the extreme-right, such as is the case in Brazil today. Besides, innovative programmes relating to climate change, radical changes in capitalism and labour, social welfare, etc. are necessary, beyond conventional policies and politics, re-engaging workers and plebeians overall, the youth and women (Domingues, 2020). We have a long way ahead in order to be able to respond to these needs adequately. This may discourage many, but may also be seen as an opportunity for creative politics, in which resuming and deepening democracy must have priority, starting with a broad democratic front against the extreme-right, whether or not we believe it may establish a “fascist” government or “simply” a very repressive and controlling new sort of oligarchic regime. This exceeds the Brazilian situation, surely, consisting in a global issue, but assumes, in the face of recent political developments, specific features there. We need to be attentive to both. Besides, the next years are bound to be marked by a deep, economic and social as well as possibly political, crisis, with perhaps unforeseeable consequences.

With Lula’s absolutely likely candidacy, after his trials were annulled in the STF in March 2021, the scenario obviously changes. He, who has always refused a politics of democratic front, could supposedly individually defeat Bolsonaro in 2022. Once again, Lula and the PT most probably manage to impose themselves hegemonically on its political spectrum, and maybe even stall movements of renewal and change within the

left and the centre-left. But it would be false to assume that, as he and his supporters apparently would like to believe, a return to 2002 is possible. This judicial change was pushed by STF's Justice Gilmar Mendes (who had juridically vetoed Lula's participation in the Rousseff's government and clearly operates for the centre-right oligarchic sectors). He has now declared Moro's *suspicion* in Lula's case after the revelation, by the site Intercept, of inadequate conversations between the judge and the public prosecutors, with however a preemptive move by Justice Edson Fachin, who is more sympathetic towards the Lava-Jato operation and had annulled Moro's ruling through a mere a change of jurisdiction (without cancelling former criminal procedures). What the final juridical consequences will be and what Mendes' annulment means to the judiciary and the political system will be gradually revealed. In any case, a new conjuncture has opened, although Bolsonaro should not by no means be underestimated. Bolsonaro has moreover bent the army to his will, preventing his former health Minister, active army General Eduardo Pazuello, from being punished for taking part, with him, in a political demonstration. On the other had the **Congress Inquiry Commission (CPI)** installed to investigate the management of the pandemic has shown, if that was really needed, how reckless Bolsonaro and his government have behaved, whether or not this will have further legal and political consequences.

Let me finish resuming Adorno's ([1967] 2019:54-55) lecture. Pretending to be smart or lying like right extremists do (whether they are true fascists or not) cannot, he argued, an adequate answer: instead, it is with the *resounding power of reason*, with its *non-ideological truth*, that the answer to the irrationalism and violence the extreme-right constantly mobilize should be given. It is false to ask about the future of right extremism, the extreme-right as I have named it here, as if it were a *natural catastrophe*, as nothing could do be done and resignation in the face of it was the only thing left. How it will develop and the responsibility for this depends on the social forces mobilized against it. The same applies however to the unprecedented social crisis Brazil will undergo in the next years and to the answers that shall be given to it.

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