

Brazil: Fascism advances

Special Opinion Letter from the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation about the current political moment in Brazil, October 2018.

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Brazil's recent historical process leaves many things clear, old debates that were resurrected about possible paths for changes, popular hopes and collective emotions put into play in the framework of the old tools of the system. In our Latin America we already knew about the tragic experience of "the peaceful path to socialism" of Allende and other processes that, through the state and many times through the electoral route, attempted some reforms of major or minor content.

The pure and hard neoliberalism of the '90s opened the doors to political changes throughout Latin America. And Brazil was a relevant point in that process, when Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva took over the government in 2003. Lula, who was born into political life in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a trade union leader of the powerful metallurgical union in the ABC Paulista industrial zone, did not represent its most combative wing. But he was the main leader of that union, a reference point in numerous strikes and in the powerful CUT (Unified Workers' Central), a union centre with an interesting component of class independence as it broke with the traditional "state trade unionism" inherited from the populist era of Getúlio Vargas.

Popular protagonism was decisive at the time of achieving the end of the military dictatorship in 1983. Imposing workers' mobilisations and the also incipient MST (Landless People's Movement) created the conditions for the expulsion of the military from government and the opening of a certain period of "democratisation", which was to be synthesised in the 1988 Constitution, which recognised a series of workers' rights and social rights for the population as a whole. An arduous struggle that had positive results in advances in rights and that also generated a "new Republic", to put it one way.

Right at that moment, all that energy and growth at the popular level and confluence in the struggles of various oppressed sectors is channeled by the leadership of the CUT and other social movements towards an electoral solution, creating the PT (Workers' Party).

But the history of Brazil throughout the 20th century had practically been a history of oligarchical governments and "barracks". The Constitution of 1889 provided that only 3.5% of the population voted, and this generated a series of very significant political and social conflicts, among them the general strike of 1917, which saw important participation and impulse from the anarchist militancy. On the other hand, in the 1920s, there were uprisings by certain military sectors led by Luis Carlos Prestes, linked to the formation of the Communist Party of Brazil, demanding greater political participation for the population (expansion of citizenship) and certain social and economic rights. Logically, this movement also denotes bids for power between sectors of the Army.

In 1930, there was a new military coup that put Getúlio Vargas at the helm of government. A response to the world economic crisis of 1929, which hit Brazil hard, but which is also a synthesis of the power struggle in the country. Not only does a sector of the Army triumph, but also the mining and São Paulo bourgeoisie, and the Gaúcho landowners – the axis of power running to the ruling classes of the central-southern region of the country. Getúlio Vargas reformed the Constitution, repressed any attempt at popular mobilisation and staged another coup again in 1937, creating the "New State" in imitation of Mussolini's fascist state. Vargas was to govern until 1945, at first with the support of the United States, then without it; in that year a military coup deposes Vargas. An overly nationalist regime was seen by the US as a potential danger, especially if it was a country with the potential for industrial development that Brazil possessed – and possesses.

But Getúlio is to have his revenge by means of the electoral route in 1951. He triumphs and is elected president, promotes an import substitution model and the industrial development of Brazil, accepts foreign investments in industry and in the development of the productive apparatus. For example, Petrobras is created in this period. In Vargas's first term the *Vale do Rio Doce* state mining company was created. A politician of fascist orientation but that, within the framework of the Latin American and international economic situation, promoted a model of industrial development and the impulse of certain bourgeois sectors.

In 1954, Getúlio Vargas committed suicide and in his "testimonial letter" he points out that those responsible for hindering the development of Brazil – and indeed for him taking his own life – are the international economic and financial groups allied with national groups.

The last "developmentalist" push came at the hand of the Juscelino Kubitschek government, together with Janio Quadros and the government of Joao Goulart between 1961 and 1964. But attempts at a "serious capitalism", of a "developed Brazil", once again crashed against the groups of power and their interests. The military staged a coup d'état and installed an extremely harsh dictatorship until 1983.

That dictatorial process is what puts an end to the popular mobilisation of the early '80s, and this whole process is to be channeled toward the electoral road. The PT would go on to demobilise popular organisations until they achieve their almost total domestication in the interests of Lula's electoral victory.

The PT in government

The Lula and Dilma periods brought about economic assistance measures such as the Bolsa Família Plan, which took 4 million people out of hunger in the Northeast of Brazil. But a finance man of the Empire was placed in the Central Bank of Brazil: Henrique Meirelles. In this way the Lula government gave a clear signal to the financial and business establishment that economic policy was not going to suffer alterations, it would follow the line designed by the previous president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

These governments also brought about the Trade Union Reform, which made it possible to fragment the CUT and create small trade union centres financed by the Trade Union Tax, that is, with state funding. This led several political parties to break several unions and form their own centrals or "mini-centrals".

These progressivist governments in Brazil included a more independent position in the Latin American area and towards the United States, with Mercosur, Unasur and through BRICS. But internally it also included the continuation of assassinations of landless militants and the "Anti-Terrorist Law", criminalising the popular movement; military invasion in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro leading up to the Olympics and reactivation of entire areas of the city for real estate speculation. It included multi-million dollar expenditures for the Olympics and the 2014 World Cup, while very little was invested in health, education and housing and the cost of public transport was too high.

That was the beginning of the popular mobilisations of 2013. In March, a movement for free public transport started in Porto Alegre. It was not something new; the Free Pass Movement (*Movimento Passe Livre*, MPL) had been struggling for years in several of the country's cities. But from this moment, this movement took on a mass character and, for example, in Porto Alegre

various social movements joined together in the Struggle Bloc (*Bloco de Luta*) and occupied the State Legislature, which was vacated after an agreement with the councillors that they vote for the reduction of transport costs. All a victory of the popular movement.

In June, the movement of struggle and protest grew widespread throughout the country, with 1 million people taking to the streets. A movement initiated by students and the Free Pass Movement but that was joined by other social sectors, such as organised neighbourhoods and communities, in protest against the wasting of money on construction works for the World Cup and the Olympics and the lack of resources for society. Such was the case that Dilma Rousseff had to recognise this reality and attend to the demands of the protesters, creating a fund with the profits of oil exploration in order to turn it into education and health.

These mobilisations marked a deep social discontent: they highlighted that important social problems were not being addressed and even less resolved; that some had progressed tepidly, but that it was not enough; the people demanded more progress and to attend to the urgent social needs. It was obvious that the PT governments were benefiting the construction companies and exporters, mainly soy producers. The mobilisations questioned the model of accumulation of the period: export mono-production to China, taking advantage of the high prices of raw materials, direct foreign investment with all the guarantees, alliance with the industrial bourgeoisie of São Paulo...

And the “Lava Jato” corruption scandal, a corruption scheme mounted through Petrobras and other public companies, was uncovered in an immense network of corruption in which countless politicians from all parties and a significant amount of businesspeople were implicated. It revived the Mensalao scandal of 2005, during the first years of the Lula government that cost him the resignation and judicial sentencing of José Dirceu, the president’s right-hand man and architect of said corruption scheme.

It was again uncovered, and it was again confirmed, that the basis of governance in Brazil was in bribes, in the money that the government put in the pockets of the legislators and, logically, the private companies, real Brazilian multinationals, did the same. Within capitalist values no party would manage to govern in Brazil without this scheme of corruption, since there is a copious number of political parties, many of them state or regional, and a totally unstable bourgeois liberal political system. Let us keep in mind what was outlined above: the liberal democratic periods in Brazil are exceptions in its recent history.

Dilma Arrives

In 2011, Dilma Rousseff assumes power with the intention of continuing the *Lulista* legacy. She is reelected for a second term between 2015 and 2019 by a narrow margin. The weathering of the government and criticism from the popular sectors for all that the expenses of the World Cup and other events had meant could be felt. Dilma Rousseff’s Vice President was Michel Temer, of the PMDB (Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement), a party created by the military dictatorship and the backbone of all governments from 1983 onwards.

But the big media – the Globo Network – and the right also appeared, putting the issue of corruption on the public agenda. Lava Jato was not yet talked about, but surely from the factual, real power they knew. And that pot was uncovered. Judge Sergio Moro appeared on the scene, useful to certain interests but presenting himself as a kind of moralist crusader against corruption.

Meanwhile, parliament was holding an express judgment against Dilma Rousseff, orchestrated by the legislators themselves, who were later proven to be a fundamental part of the corruption scheme. This whole manoeuvre was orchestrated by Vice President Michel Temer – Dilma and Lula’s partner in government – in order to assume the Presidency himself and to now put three sectors that have stood out in Brazilian politics at the centre of political action: the ruralists, the evangelicals and the arms-military sector.

Dilma is displaced by her partners; the PT and social movements do not take to the streets against this coup d’état, which was characterised as a “soft coup”. And then comes Lula’s going to prison and all the direct persecution of the PT. Heavy blows follow for those at the bottom of society, above all the huge rolling back of social and labor rights and the decades of regression that this means, leaving a countless number of social struggles along the way.

It should be noted that in the legislative elections after the “soft coup”, the PT maintained alliances with the PMDB, the party of Temer, in several states and cities.

Temer, Bolsonaro and the military

Temer was made out as the “strong man” in this new situation, but that did not last long. The discredit into which his figure and his government fell with the advance of the corruption scheme investigation, the winning denunciations of the owners and executives of the JBS refrigeration company and the anti-popular measures he was taking left a new “power vacuum” in the spheres of government.

The military – whose army chief, General Villas Boas, says plain and simply that the Armed Forces are ready to “establish order” amid the political chaos that reigns in the country – wants to fill this “vacuum” at the governmental level, and in a certain harmony with the power structure of the moment. And so it is that the displacement of the PT from government and the assumption of Temer have generated limitless political instability.

In this context the figure of Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer and a deputy for two decades, had gone virtually unnoticed all this time, until the day of Dilma’s impeachment. There he paid tribute to the soldier who tortured Dilma Rousseff during the dictatorship, boasted of the military coup d’état and deployed a fascist diatribe. A diatribe that he continued and deepened to achieve his positioning as a presidential candidate, with a fierce discourse in favour of the dictatorship and torture, against women and the LGBT community, and against the black community. A true Nazi. It is worth mentioning that in January of this year he joined the PSL (Social Liberal Party), the party for which he ran for the Presidency of the Republic, and this is his ninth party in his political career. The same can be said of other candidates, who had their period of “switching parties” in the run-up to the elections.

How is it possible for this character to become the most voted candidate and is surely going to be the next president of Brazil? Everything that we have reviewed has affected this. The political instability of Brazil, its scant liberal-democratic life, but the PT’s legacy in the government and the electoral path chosen plays a fundamental role, which has generated a great “political vacuum” of the left and of a left culture, that opens up spaces for the most reactionary and fascist ideologies, as has been happening in Europe as well.

We do not want to avoid it. We know that it is left to analyse a whole spectrum of ideology of important sectors of the people, especially those at the bottom, that seem accused here of a very

high degree of disciplining, control, identification with imposed notions and representations, produced from the dominant structure. That the discontent, the despair, the anger have a channeling that has its specificity but with points of contact with what is happening in other places and that at times moves towards demagogic calls from the right. But these are not consolidated ideological groups, and many of them are not long-lasting either; they are in a dynamic play of subjectivities within a complex web of relationships. But, without doubt, it is all a challenge and a serious call to analyse future processes of subjective production that must necessarily confront any line of transformative work in the bosom of the people. New devices of the system tend to reinforce the insertion of the subject in this miserable structure of domination. We are left to consider how at the same time we can strengthen resistance and with it areas of conscience that counteract the aforementioned disciplining.

The limits of progressivism and developmentalist models

Anarchism has historically argued that no change is possible through the state and elections. That these structures do not allow modifications of content – and most of the time not even small ones – but that would rather crush whoever gets into them, a real corral of branches that does not allow escape. History teaches it with crystal clarity. Even those processes that have dared to touch the interests of the ruling classes and the empire have been overthrown by ferocious dictatorships and repression (the case of Allende in Chile, Arbenz in Guatemala, Bosch in the Dominican Republic, Omar Torrijos in Panama, etc.).

The electoral route is a dead end for changes. This path does not lead to any change, but turns the wheel of the system, which from time to time permits some small modification in order to keep everything as it is. Power is not at stake in this way.

Recently, the opinion of Frei Betto has circulated, which makes an interesting criticism of the PT and progressivist governments from another ideological matrix: they neglected the ideological development of the population. He points out that this had already happened in the USSR and in Eastern Europe. The disregard for popular organisations and mobilisation were lethal in undermining these processes and that not everything is resolved with “better living conditions”, which only fostered consumerism within the framework of the existing society. There was no transformative or critical logic. And he says: “We direct a good but cosmetic policy, lacking roots, without foundations for its stability”. In this sense, he is also critical of the Cuban Revolution and the shortcomings also generated in the ideological development in that process.

The dispute of subjectivity: that’s the big issue. The progressivist governments bet all their chips to make the populations content with a certain standard of living – very basic in fact – and access to consumption. Even in Brazil there was talk of a “new middle class”, which was nothing more than the poor popular sectors that managed to buy a plasma and the latest model phone.

It is clear once more that the electoral route is not the one shown to achieve substantive changes, nor to confront the power of the dominant classes. To get into government the PT had to reduce and dilute their program as well as compromise with the economic powers of Brazil and the Empire. The FA (Broad Front – *Frente Amplio*) did the same in Uruguay; remember Tabaré Vázquez going to the IMF with Astori to present him as Minister of Economy before the 2004 elections.

The period of progressivism in Latin America has clearly demonstrated its limits: there are no possibilities for change through this path. The Latin American ruling classes and US imperialism tolerate any type of left or popular bias, however tepid and sanitised it may be, less and less. They no longer tolerate a few pesos being used to contain the most atrocious misery, nor access to a minimum standard of living for the popular sectors, they do not tolerate measures such as the legalisation of abortion, gender equality, etc. It is the true face of the ruling classes, totally conservative and reactionary, fascists, that support any authoritarian recourse to maintain their privileges and deepen the system of domination in all its aspects. This is pure and hard capitalism, it is the system in its full expression. It is financial, agrarian and industrial fascism. It is the model that seeks to impose itself in Latin America and a good part of the world now.

The popular struggle is the only guarantee for change

But the Brazilian people have not been quiet. Beyond the “quietism” imposed by the bureaucracy of the PT and the CUT, and the limiting of the struggle to demanding Lula’s liberation, the various grassroots organisations have been mobilised by concrete issues, against austerity and cuts in social spending. It is true, the scenario has been dominated by the release of Lula, but there are sectors of the Brazilian people who see that nothing is going to be solved with Lula free and a candidate. Neither with another candidate that is his puppet. An important mobilisation of rejection of Bolsonaro led by the feminist movement was generated. The “*Ele não*” (“*Not him*”) campaign and slogan unmasks the most truculent of this fascist. Here is a way to deepen the struggle.

We reiterate something to which we refer above. The really important thing to analyse and take into account is how the same portion of voters who were going to vote for Lula if he was a candidate have voted for Bolsonaro. In large percentage, they are the same voters. What phenomenon occurs there that motivates people willing to vote for a “left” candidate equally to vote for a fascist? Such is the discredit of the Brazilian political system that people are willing to vote for a “strong man”, “leader”, “a saviour”. It does not matter who. The weight of ideology, certain devices and the media – producers of political notions and options – operating at full speed. We see how ideological elements change and circulate with fluidity in certain conditions. We have to find and carry out actions so that they circulate in our direction.

For this reason, the only guarantee of putting a brake on this fascist advance is organised popular struggle. And this itself is the only guarantee of change. All social and labour rights have been won by struggle. The advance of the Agrarian Reform has been with struggle and occupations of land organised by the peasant movements. The history of the Brazilian popular movement is very rich in this sense.

There are no shortcuts, there are no exits in the labyrinths of the system. The construction of a true popular alternative lies in those social movements that have been resisting the attacks by all the governments and have opened their way in struggle: the workers’, students’ and peasants’ movements, the black movement and its *quilombola* communities, the indigenous movement... it will not be easy or quick, but a resistant Brazilian people will find their way, will build Popular Power, the only guarantee of advancement for those at the bottom and the making of changes and a different society. Along this path are our comrades from the Brazilian Anarchist Coordination (CAB – *Coordenação Anarquista Brasileira*), who carry out intense militant activity throughout

the country and are committed to strengthening popular organisations and a process of progress in struggles. They have been protagonists of varied struggles in these more than 20 years, and in this last period they have encouraged taking to the streets against the cuts.

All our support goes to our comrades of the CAB and to the Brazilian popular organisations that through resistance seek their way with class independence and solidarity, from below and with full democracy and the direct participation of the people.

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