



SEÇÃO: RESENHA

Precarious Democracy: Ethnographies of Hope, Despair, and Resistance in Brazil, edited by Benjamin Junge, Sean T. Mitchell, Alvaro Jarrín, and Lucia Cantero

Precarious Democracy: Ethnographies of Hope, Despair, and Resistance in Brazil, organizado por Benjamin Junge, Sean T. Mitchell, Alvaro Jarrin e Lucia Cantero

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Abstract: This book review examines *Precarious Democracy: Ethnographies of Hope, Despair, and Resistance in Brazil* (2021), edited by Benjamin Junge, Sean T. Mitchell, Alvaro Jarrin, and Lucia Cantero. The edited volume contains ethnographies addressing the Brazilian social landscape after Workers Party administrations. These chapters discuss the mechanisms of *Bolsonarismo* and the contradictory ways through which people show support to President Jair Bolsonaro. The book has sixteen chapters, authored by scholars hailing from different parts of the globe, who examine this topic in different parts of Brazil. As a rigorous yet accessible anthropological work, I argue that the book is an important addition to current discussions on Brazil's sociopolitical and economic situation.

Keywords: Bolsonarism. Far-right. Ethnography. Electoral process.

Resumo: Esta resenha analisa o livro *Precarious Democracy: Ethnographies of Hope, Despair, and Resistance in Brazil* (2021), editado por Benjamin Junge, Sean T. Mitchell, Alvaro Jarrin e Lucia Cantero. O livro traz uma coletânea de etnografias relativas ao Brasil pós-Partido dos Trabalhadores, que discutem os mecanismos do Bolsonarismo e as contraditórias manifestações em apoio ao presidente Jair Bolsonaro. O livro é composto de dezesseis capítulos, com autores de diversas partes do mundo, reunindo trabalhos que investigam tal tema em diversas partes do Brasil. Como um trabalho antropológico rigoroso, mas ao mesmo tempo acessível, argumento que o livro traz importante acréscimo às discussões correntes sobre a situação sociopolítica e econômica do Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Bolsonarismo. Extrema-direita. Etnografia. Processo eleitoral.

This book review examines *Precarious Democracy: Ethnographies of Hope, Despair, and Resistance in Brazil*, edited by Benjamin Junge (State University of New York at New Paltz), Sean T. Mitchell (Rutgers University), Alvaro Jarrin (College of the Holy Cross), and Lucia Cantero (University of San Francisco). The edited volume is divided into four parts, each composed of four chapters. The book examines challenges, attitudes of hope, and activism in Brazil's post-Workers Party Era, with detailed ethnographic work that seeks to understand the operationalization of *Bolsonarismo*, but which also investigates forms of resistance and contestation. As a critical piece, the volume examines issues of gender, race, sexuality, religion, among other topics of relevance in today's Brazil. Contributors hail from different parts of the world. Due to the book's length and complexity, this review is focused on one chapter of each section.



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This piece will first address each selected chapter before moving into a literature discussion, which will place these sections into context.

Overview

In "Dreaming with Guns: Performing Masculinity and Imagining Consumption in Bolsonaro's Brazil," Isabela Kalil, Rosana Pinheiro-Machado, and Lucia Mury Scalco (2021, 50-61) present an ethnographic work based on research conducted in Porto Alegre and São Paulo during the 2018 elections. The chapter seeks to understand broader meanings of gun-related performances, including gestures, and how they contributed to "the emergence of new subjectivities and dreams" (Kalil et al. 2021, 51) for men. Authors concluded that class anxiety and aspirations for class mobility were quite similar among subjects in both localities. Among low-income Porto Alegre men, those sympathetic for Bolsonaro's ideological inclinations perceived themselves as survivors, who managed to escape from the attractiveness of criminality, and who understood themselves as honest, hardworking, citizens (Kalil et al. 2021, 52). The chapter indicates how contradictory this narrative is. Some of the subjects enjoyed, for instance, music with lyrics suggestive of criminal activity. Others supported items of the "progressive agenda," such as women's demands, including the right to abortion. All men, however, fitting to *Bolsonarismo*, criticized affirmative action and welfare programs (Kalil et al. 2021, 54). In São Paulo, authors focus on the entertainment dimension of Bolsonaro's campaign, which included motorcades in association to the above-mentioned fetishization of guns. There, scholars focused on broader social diversity among subjects, as well as on a broader number of demands from those subjects, such as Bolsonaro's support to permissive driving legislation, tax breaks for cars, among other proposals that would benefit middle classes (Kalil et al. 2021, 57). Despite varying characteristics, groups in both Brazilian cities adhered to polarized notions of "good and evil" groups, placing Lula da Silva in the latter (Kalil et al. 2021, 60).

Attitudes towards criminality and contradictory understandings on religion, both of which marked Bolsonaro's campaign in 2018, are central to the book's second part. Karina Biondi (2021, 91-102), in "The Effects of Some Religious Affects: Revolutions in Crime," examines Evangelical influences among incarcerated men linked to a major drug cartel, Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). The contradiction in this case relies on the fact that Bolsonaro and the Brazilian religious right tend to adhere to radical notions of hard punishment, often linked to propositions on establishing the death penalty (currently only authorized in Brazil at times of war as per the Military Penal Code), or supportive of extrajudicial killings (which are widespread in the country). In other words, Biondi's central research question refers to "how Bolsonaro secured the vote of people whose moral inclinations and behavioral profiles are so different from his" (Biondi 2021, 93). Among relatives of prisoners, some adhered to Bolsonaro because they perceived the situation of their imprisoned loved ones as linked to the Workers Party administration (Biondi 2021, 93). Biondi is also concerned with the relationship between criminal factions and Evangelicalism. The scholar distances herself, however, from attempts to draw clear lines between both, as if the PCC or Evangelical churches were solid, homogeneous, entities (Biondi 2021, 96). Instead, Biondi's ethnography considers the contradictory signs coming from the field, such as a reference, by an inmate, to the Ten Commandments, when discussing the right profile of a PCC member (Biondi 2021, 96). Another angle of the chapter refers to the perception, by some, that the PCC could act as an antagonist to state oppression, resolving conflicts within marginalized communities, in a sort of "revolution." At the same time, this understanding is conflicting with Bolsonaro's agenda as well as with ideas of legitimization of police brutality and extrajudicial killings. Here Biondi takes us to a central aspect of her chapter, which relies on the contradictions of religiosity. In her words, "religious discourse is able to trigger different feelings...this affective engagement...can

result in movements for revolutions based on opposing orientations and aims" (Biondi 2021, 100).

Whereas the first two parts of the book take the audience on a journey through the contradictory feelings that contributed to Bolsonaro's election as president in 2018, the third part includes attitudes against and skepticism towards *Bolsonarismo*. In "Tempered Hopes: '(Re)producing the Middle Class in Recife's Alternative Music Scene," Falina Enriquez (2021, 142-154) examines the hardships experienced by musicians in the Northeastern Brazilian city of Recife, as well as their attitudes towards rising far-right discourses. In doing so, a major contribution by Enriquez relies on the fact that precarity in the 2010s impacted not only lower social strata, but also increasingly encompassed middle classes (Enriquez 2021, 143). In the state of Pernambuco, support to artists had been a marker in public policy through the 2000s. By 2014, however, cuts began to occur, and in 2015 in the context of a major crisis, state authorities shifted away from their previous support to culture (Enriquez 2021, 145-146). Under Bolsonaro's administration, the cultural realm came to be treated as a non-priority, further compressing the local music scene (Enriquez 2021, 146). Enriquez gives special attention to the gig-based routine of musicians in the context of a precarious situation of culture. The examined stories provide an interesting case of a broader decline in living conditions in the 2010s (particularly in the second half of the decade), after a more prosperous decade in which not only culture was prioritized, but also in which Brazilians benefited from major social improvements. Such a decline, however, as emphasized by Enriquez throughout the chapter, is not uniform, and varies according to race and social status. Moreover, precarity is also a global phenomenon, attached to ideologies that cross national boundaries. In the author's words, issues of insecurity "are symptomatic of Brazil's current circumstances" and reflect "global economic and ideological shifts that are intensifying precarity among the previously insulated middle classes" (Enriquez 2021, 151).

In the fourth part of the book, Alvaro Jarrín

(2021, 206-217), in "Disgust and Defiance: The Visceral Politics of Trans and Travesti Activism amid a Heteronormative Backlash," brings an optimistic discussion on how trans communities have been able to resist and navigate Brazil's current sociopolitical context. The chapter explores São Paulo's vivid cultural scene, in which gender-nonconforming performers bring to the public powerful critiques on heteronormativity. In the author's terms, "much of the 'artivism' being created and promoted...seeks to render trans bodies visible and familiar" (Jarrín 2021, 211). In doing so, activists confront "the revulsion toward trans bodies that is promoted by the religious right" (Jarrín 2021, 211). The section is not limited to in-person performances, also addressing campaigns that circulate much further, such as a poster by the Brazilian Institute of Transmasculinities (IBRAT) which showed trans man with visible mastectomy scars, with a caption that suggested pride and the desire to be happy (Jarrín 2021, 211). Jarrín (2021) also takes the issue of religiosity to a totally different direction from the analysis presented by Biondi (2021). Some Brazilian activists contest religious hostility projected upon them not by dismissing religion, but rather through the incorporation of their religious views into their activism. Jarrín (2021) cites, for instance, the First Conference on LGBTTI Churches and Communities, held in São Paulo in 2019, as well as Linn da Quebrada's association of travesti suffering to Christian depictions of martyrdom, among other examples (Jarrín 2021, 213). Jarrín concludes with remarks on the twofold character of the 2018 elections. While some interpret Bolsonaro's 2018 election as the end of a previous order, Jarrín reminds the audience that the same electoral process brought a record number of women into office, including three trans women elected to Congress (Jarrín 2021, 215). With a bold analysis of trans and travesti activism in Brazil, Jarrín underscores how moments in which rights seem to be threatened, particularly those of non-heteronormative populations, can also be periods of change, innovation, and hope.

Literature discussion

Bolsonaro and *Bolsonarismo* have been the focus of studies in the social sciences, hence the drastic changes in Brazil's policies and the ideological changes among those who benefited from social improvements under previous administrations. The edited volume is precisely concerned with these shifting stances, and how they manifest among members of particular social groups. As such, it contributes to complex intellectual discussions on the rise of *Bolsonarismo*, moving away from simplistic definitions of such a phenomenon. As Marcos Nobre contends, Bolsonaro cannot be deemed as "crazy" or "dumb" (Nobre 2020). Forces that support his figure and the broader ideological markers of *Bolsonarismo* are complex and should be examined with care and caution. *Bolsonarismo* has not emerged from a vacuum, and the stories narrated in the volume recall the deep layers of prejudice, sexism, racism, and LGBTphobia that have marked Brazilian society. As discussed by Leandro Pereira Gonçalves and Odilon Caldeira Neto (2020), far-right ideologies need to be historicized, and in the case of Brazil they have been present in different forms and shapes throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Even if disguised in different ways, contemporary groups often recall twentieth-century fascism. Gonçalves and Caldeira Neto (2020) examine, for example, the Frente Integralista Brasileira alongside other institutions, and their relationship to *Bolsonarismo*. In their words, "[Bolsonaro's rise] did not occur out of sudden, as it was constructed through a long experience in the media, despite his timid and almost nonexistent role at the Chamber of Deputies" (Gonçalves and Caldeira Neto 2020, 190). While direct connections between Bolsonaro and far-right activists are not as trivial or easy to prove as one would expect, Gonçalves and Caldeira Neto indicate that persons and entities gravitate around the president, and explicitly support his agenda. In line with such a perspective, Karl Schurster and Michel Gherman (2020) alert the audience on the need of avoiding analyses of far-right phenomena as "mere political accidents;" an understanding

that in fact contributes to these ideologies, which rely on mythmaking and on the de-historicization of their own trajectories.

Another important contribution *Prekarious Democracy* offers relies on the multifaceted nature of *Bolsonarismo*, and how supporters relate to it in different ways. The contradictory statements found by Kalil et al. (2021) among Bolsonaro supporters as well as Biondi's (2021) examination of moral divergences between right-wing Evangelicalism and its adherents indicate how *Bolsonarismo* is far from being a cohesive unit. Michel Gherman and Misha Klein (2019) have examined the support of specific sectors within the Jewish community in Brazil to Bolsonaro's campaign, exemplified by the latter's visit to the Hebraica Club in Rio de Janeiro. Such a visit exemplified Bolsonaro's support to the State of Israel, shared with members of the Jewish community which had invited him to the event. But at the same time, many other members of the community disapproved of such an encounter and disagreed with the (then) candidate's moral (and discriminatory) agenda. It is also doubtful whether any member of the Jewish community would agree with the antisemitic nature of Brazil's fascism, whose foundational years and more recent developments are explored by Gonçalves and Caldeira Neto (2020). Which is to say that ideologies are non-uniform, and *Bolsonarismo* is no exception.

Conclusion

The rigorous yet accessible ethnographies in *Prekarious Democracy* add a much-needed layer to today's public debate. As *Bolsonarismo* emerged and consolidated with a presidential election in 2018, scholars sought to understand its mechanisms and reasons why so many Brazilians adhered to Bolsonaro's platform. The various chapters indicate how reasons for the 2018 electoral results vary and, in fact, how there is a lack of cohesion among those who support the current government and its allies. Moreover, the book also provides valuable discussions on how Brazilians have sought to contest and challenge

the wave of right-wing populism that has taken the national government. As the ethnographies reveal, *Bolsonarismo* is far from hegemonic, despite its influence and Bolsonaro's success on the ballot.

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