



DOSSIÊ - REPENSAR A EXTREMA DIREITA EM UMA PERSPECTIVA TRANSNACIONAL

Trump and Bolsonaro: Neo-Fascists Expressions of a Failed Attempt to Redefine Brazil-US Asymmetrical Relations

Trump e Bolsonaro: Expressões Neo-Fascistas da Frustrada Tentativa de Redefinir as Assimétricas Relações entre o Brasil e os EUA

Trump y Bolsonaro: Expresiones neo-fascistas del frustrado intento de redefinir las relaciones asimétricas entre Brasil y Estados Unidos

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Abstract: This paper examines how the rise of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro to the presidencies of their respective countries impacted the course of relationship between the US and Brazil. The piece resorts to discursive analyses and qualitative and quantitative methodologies to advance the argument that the conditions of possibility that allowed for such unexpected figures to emerge in the political scene are tied to a larger and still on-going crisis of the liberal order put in place in the aftermath of WWII. Moreover, we argue that even if expressions of a global trend of emerging neo-fascism, the specific conditions of the United States and Brazil did not allow for a profound redefinition in the historical course of relations between the America's two largest democracies, reiterating instead the asymmetrical nature of their interaction.

Keywords: Donald Trump; Jair Bolsonaro; Neo-Fascism; Democratic Crisis; Liberal Order.

Resumo: O presente artigo examina como a emergência política de Donald Trump e Jair Bolsonaro em seus respectivos países impactou os rumos da relações entre os Estados Unidos e o Brasil. O trabalho e a pesquisa que o sustenta se valeram de metodologias várias, incluindo a análise do discurso histórico e de dados qualitativos e quantitativos. Em seu conjunto, nosso estudo nos permite afirmar que as condições de possibilidade que permitiram a ascensão de tais figuras tão idiosincráticas estão ligadas a uma crise mais ampla da ordem liberal criada no pós-Segunda Guerra. Da mesma forma, nosso estudo aponta que, apesar de inter-ligadas como expressões de um movimento neo-fascista mais amplo, tais figuras não foram capazes de redefinir os rumos da relações bi-laterais de maneira consequente dadas as condições específicas de cada país e da natureza assimétrica do relacionamento.

Palavras-chave: Donald Trump; Jair Bolsonaro; Neo-Fascismo; Crise Democrática; Ordem Liberal.

Resumen: El presente artículo examina cómo la emergencia política de Donald Trump y Jair Bolsonaro en sus respectivos países impactó el rumbo de las relaciones entre Estados Unidos y Brasil. El trabajo y la investigación que lo sustentan se valieron de diversas metodologías, incluyendo el análisis del discurso histórico y de datos cualitativos y cuantitativos. En conjunto, nuestro estudio nos permite afirmar que las condiciones de posibilidad que permitieron el ascenso de tales figuras tan idiosincráticas están vinculadas a una crisis más amplia del orden liberal creado después de la Segunda Guerra. Asimismo, sin embargo, nuestro estudio señala que, a pesar de estar interconectadas como expresiones de un movimiento neo-fascista más amplio, dichas figuras no fueron capaces de redefinir el rumbo de las relaciones bilaterales de manera consequente debido a las condiciones específicas de cada país y la naturaleza asimétrica de la relación.



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Palabras clave: Donald Trump; Jair Bolsonaro; Neo-Fascismo; Crisis Democrática; Orden Liberal.

Introduction

The rise to the presidencies of Brazil and of the United States of the demagogic political figures of Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump, respectively, expressed a broader crisis of Liberal Democracy built on the throes of the painful socio-economic transformations produced by neoliberal economic policies implemented over the last 30 years. Tragically, however, instead of actual responses aimed at deepening the democratic shortcoming of Neoliberalism, what emerged out of this crisis were concerted reactions from oligarchic, nationalist, ultraconservative forces led by extreme right leaders, such as Bolsonaro and Trump. The similarities allying this respective recent leaders of Brazil and the USA did not mean, however, a less asymmetrical relationship between these countries, quite the opposite.

In fact, this newest iteration of demagoguery offered false responses to the serious challenges their societies faced. In specific, Trump sought to develop a fraught but nonetheless effective xenophobic alliance between business sectors frightened by rising global competition and, mostly white, workers impacted by absolute and relative socio-economic decline. Alternatively, Bolsonaro pursued an uncritical alignment with the US under Trump, with support provided by strong agribusiness forces, economic sectors associated with transnational capital, and workers disappointed with the limits on stalled recent social mobility and corruption involving the Workers' Party (PT) governments of the early 2000s.

This paper examines the main contours of Brazil-US relations under Trump and Bolsonaro. The first section offers a brief reflection of the crisis of Liberal Democracy to situate hemispheric events within a still on-going broader historical trend. The second section analyzes the rise of right-wing populism in the United States under Trump. The third section focuses on the recent crisis of democratic rule in Latin America and Brazil, a process that unfolded within the decline of the

so-called Pink Tide. The fourth section scrutinizes key policies pursued between the administrations of Bolsonaro and Trump, their underpinnings, achievements, and shortcomings. We conclude, by restating the case that that though Trump and Bolsonaro emerged from similar political contexts, Brazil-US relations assumed an inherently contradictory character as Bolsonaro subsumed his actions under Trump's broader global push to "Make America Great Again."

The Global Rise of Neo-Fascism and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy: A Brief Overview

Liberal Democracy seems to live today one of its most important threats as extreme right-wing leaders are hollowing out democratic principles from within, by running for and often winning elections and then, once in power, actively working to erode democratic functioning institutions and the very notion of democratic culture. Classic Liberalism, it should be recalled, demanded more than simply findings ways to resolving conflicts peacefully as it also required – as first enshrined in the US Constitutions and its supporting foundational documents, such as the Federalist Papers – mechanism to prevent the persistent drive of a hegemonic group to eliminate minorities (FUKUYAMA, 2020). In effect, over time, Liberal Democracy went beyond the imagined ethnic-community-based 19th-century nationalist experiences, also include, in most places, the notion of legal equality within diversity (ANDERSON, 2016). In the postwar context, liberal democracies corroborated professed Enlightenment ideals expressed on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to all peoples. In short, if all members of a polity are entitled to the same notion of equal dignity, despite cultural differences, then all should be equally allowed to exist (co-exist) and participate in the political process – at least conceptually.

This brief revision of the evolution of political Liberalism should not distract us from the fact that classic Liberalism has an inherent shortcoming in its promise of equality. This is particularly true in the economic realm, where classic notions of

freedom for the pursuit of economic success did not imply any requirement for fairness in the outcomes derived from untrammelled free-market operations. Still, liberal notions provided the first fundamental understanding of the universal shared dignity of all peoples, at least, initially, of all members of a national polity. This is not, however, what right-wing, elected but not necessarily democratic, leaders have propounded around the world. To be sure, leaders like Hungary's Viktor Orbán, India's Narendra Modi, Donald Trump in the United States, Recep Erdogan in Turkey, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, all have sought to undermine judicial independence, dismantle professional bureaucracies, delegitimize the press, and foster the sense of opposition forces as internal enemies to be eliminated. Putin, for one, has even declared the very obsolescence of the liberal logic at large (BARBER; FOY, 2019).

Given the relative novelty of the phenomenon, consensual definitions about how to deal with are yet to emerge. Armando Boito Jr. (2020) and Wendy Brown (2019), for once, have suggested that extreme right-wing leaders should be examined under the lens of Neo-Fascism as present-day authoritarian leaders have carried out pro-big business economic reforms, especially in the periphery of the global capitalist order, like in Brazil and India, while attacking democratic institutions and proceedings. In so doing, this Frankenstein-like reality of the *neoliberal authoritarianism* of today echoes the experience of historical Fascism while being less reliant on party organizations (replaced by social media mobilization) and less concerned about the welfare of lower-class supporter (appeal not by socio-economic inclusion but rather by ideological binary constructs: us vs. foreigner, traditional family vs. political correctness, religion vs. atheistic communism, etc.). In this sense, as a very impoverished *reason for being the world*, the neoliberal narrative of today assumes an ever more authoritarian version wherein any remaining non-individualistic, but also non-majoritarian collectively bonding notions, such as universal equality, or group identities of non-majoritarian groups, such as men, white, Hindu, heterosexual,

etc., are all increasingly vilified as threatening the good ordering of things (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2016). What is more, though on behalf of extreme individual freedoms, the neoliberal worldview behaves as a new form of totalitarianism, whose new deliverance, through Neo-Fascist demagogues, is not only very efficient but also very appropriate to its own internal authoritarian logic (*There is No Alternative*).

In concrete terms, beyond eroding economic gains of lower-economic groups, by cutting social programs and promoting a race to the bottom in terms of social, labor, and environmental legislations for over 40 years, the neoliberal agenda has also promoted an effective undermining of the democratic values by enhancing inequality. To be sure, throughout the 1990s, in Latin America, as well as in Eastern Europe and Russia, elected leaders implemented profoundly socially painful market reforms under the argument of deepening democratic standards (WEYLAND, 2004). Likewise, these authoritarian right-wing leaders also challenge, and rapidly seek to erode, the very underpinnings of democracy, such as universal suffrage and minority rights.

All in all, beyond the traditional forces behind the implementation of neoliberal agenda in the 1990s, this latest iteration of the right is indeed more authoritarian, and even though they come to power through liberal democratic procedures, they are more skeptical and actively question the very values of the liberal global economic and political orders (SLOBODIAN, 2018). Moreover, especially during the height of the Covid-19 health crisis, the idea of individual freedoms was politicized in ways conducive to attacks on minority rights and the very implementation of authoritarian majoritarian rule (ROTH, 2020).

How these global dynamics have played out in the Western hemisphere, particularly in its two most populous and influential nations, is the focus of the following sections. We first look at how right-wing extremism reemerged in the United States under Trump. We then move to examine how the experiences related to these historical trends in the Latin American and Brazilian con-

texts. We begin, in the next section, with Trump's surprising and consequential rise.

The Rise of Trump and Extreme Right-Wing at the Core of Global Politics

The global hegemony the United States has been able to exert since the end of World War II seems to face today its greatest challenge. It is important thus to review some of its main elements. First, let's recall that functional to preventing a total nuclear demise, the administration of a liberal interstate system, founded in the Cold War, articulated international security and defense strategies that included expanding economic and social programs so that alternative development models could be kept at bay. The military industry functioned as a dynamo of the global economy while the reformist governance model assured partial egalitarian political and economic aspirations, at least to those to whom hegemonic benevolence had been extended. Nevertheless, amid the most remarkable economic expansion in history, minority groups benefited only marginally from the opulence of reformist arrangements (LIND, 2012). These groups did not stand idle though, and, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights movement actively acted to demand the inclusion of racial minorities, especially blacks, in these reformist arrangements.

In the 1970s, facing the effects of the global crisis, social movements, inspired by the struggle for civil rights and Socialism, took over the world. In response to the economic crisis, global conservative elites, including intellectuals from major universities, defined reformist welfare programs as the root of the crisis and proposed bitter responses that included a strong dose of physical and/or symbolic violence to contain rising social demands inside and outside national borders. In the early 1980s, this phenomenon was consolidated under the government of Ronald Reagan whose *Reaganomics* was the greatest and most consequential political expression of the neoconservative framework for redefining domestic and global capitalism under US hegemonic influence (MOLL NETO, 2021).

Reagan's economic policies questioned the State's capacity to represent and manage collective interests adequately. Also, the Reagan administration reduced public investments, except in the defense sector, and promised to lower taxation on individuals and businesses to unlock the investment potential. Interestingly, foretelling something Trump would do later, under the paragon of the global free market, trade was subordinated to the so-called *Fair Trade*, set out to safeguard the commercial interests of US transnational companies amidst rising international competition. Nevertheless, despite its great 'sound and fury, Reagan failed to lower taxation or create better paying jobs and was the main culprit for the increased financialization and associated erosion of manufacturing in what once had been the mightiest industrial power in the world (MOLL NETO, 2021).

The historical inter-dependent (though deeply asymmetric) relationship between the USA and Latin America was uniquely reframed under the new US neoliberal hegemony of the 1980s and 90s. While domestic regional economies suffered from the foreign-debt crisis, large American manufacturers moved south part of their productive chain to find low wages, cheap inputs, tax incentives, and expanding markets. Associated with these trends, in the last 40 years, union membership in the USA has steadily dropped fourfold while inequality between families skyrocketed from 1979 to 2020, and it is today the highest among the seven wealthiest countries in the world (HIRSCH; MACPHERSON; EVEN, 2023). Moreover, confidence in traditional political and economic institutions has collapsed, increasingly seen as unable to address these socio-economic transformations (CONFIDENCE..., c2023)³. Confidence in large corporations, the media, and even

³ Between 1964 and 2018, confidence in the government to solve problems dropped from 77% to 18%. In 1964, 64% of Americans trusted that the government was working for the people. However, in 2018, 76% of Americans believed that the government was acting for the benefit of a few. In the same period, the Americans' confidence in congress fell even more, from 64% to 11%, reaching 7% in 2017. The identification with the Democratic Party fell from 51%, in 1964, to 33%, in 2017, whereas that with the Republican Party did not perform any better.

religious institutions were also dehydrated in the period (CONFIDENCE..., c2023)⁴.

As the most meaningful outcome deriving from these manifolds and multi-faceted developments, the (failed) real-estate mogul Donald Trump understood this scenario. He then acted to take advantage of his social media penetration to win the hearts and minds of atomized, largely white, workers, who saw Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) proposal as the way to fight back what they saw as the undeserved benefits (privileges) minorities (especially immigrants) were allegedly receiving. Trump also sought to obtain support from owners of large corporations. In the financial sector, this was achieved by receiving the coveted nod from multi-billion dollars market funds, such as Renaissance Technologies. Much in the same way, in the real estate market, he obtained backing from major players, such as G. H. Palmer Associates. In media and entertainment, his backers included McMahon Ventures. His backers also included key actors in manufacturing, textiles, steel, chemicals, retail consumer goods, restaurants, the gambling, tourism and food, and beverage industries (OPEN SECRETS, 2017).

Moreover, as Mike Wendling argues, the Alt-Right, a new far-right movement that emerged in the early 2010s on internet discussion forums, played a role in the election of Donald Trump, by helping to create an atmosphere of hatred and division that facilitated the victory of the Republican candidate. And although this was a phenomenon with unclear contours, the Alt-Right was unified enough around the belief in white supremacy, hatred of minorities, and opposition to multiculturalism. What's more, the Alt-Right took advantage of the internet to spread its message of hatred and radicalize young white people, who saw Trump as a chance to take their ideas to the White House (WENDLING, 2018).

The Internet has indeed given rise to a novel "informational ecosystem" that is highly polarized and fragmented. This ecosystem has facilitated the dissemination of extremist ideologies and the recruitment of new adherents through online channels (MARANTZ, 2019). And, according to Stern, the alt-right movement has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, becoming more mainstream in its approach. The movement's success can be attributed, in part, to its effective utilization of memes and online forums as tools for disseminating its message to a wider audience. The increasing prominence of white nationalist rallies, the rise of Donald Trump to the presidency, and the proliferation of anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric online are all clear indications of the alt-right's growing influence on American politics, culture, and society (STERN, 2019).

In the 2016 presidential race, Trump grabbed a significant portion of the poor white voters over 35 years old who live in the countryside cities. Also, he had an excellent performance among the super-rich. But he received only 43% of the votes of the union workers. Sustained by such diverse interests, the Trump administration adopted a contradictory but strategic foreign policy based on multiple selective approaches explicitly aimed at each challenge and calibrated according to constraints (DOMBROWSKY; REICH, 2017). In effect, according to Kahl and Brands (2017), the Trump administration's foreign policy is based on four pillars. The first one is that of the domestic security perspective, which is closely linked to the international realm from where perceived threats emanated, especially that of immigration. The second one is heightened notion of economic nationalism that highlights the disadvantages in trade relations and the economic position of the US in the global economy, especially in relation to China. Thirdly would be the goal of redesigning the country's national security along an increase in the Armed Forces, though there is hesitancy in actually deploying them. Finally, there is a focus on the construction of bilateral relations and economic agreements with partners, without concern about the adequacy of their values to American ones.

⁴ Between 1975 and 2020, confidence in large companies fell from 34% to 19%. Between 1979 and 2012, Americans' confidence in banks dropped from 60% to 21%. Eight years later, banks regained some of the confidence of Americans. Between 1979 and 2020, confidence in significant print newspapers fell from 51% to 24%. Between 1994 and 2020, confidence in news from television stations dropped from 46% to 18%. Between 1975 and 2019, confidence in religious institutions dropped from 68% to 36%.

Beyond geopolitical concerns, Trump revived the logic and narrative of "Trade instead of aid" and vehemently attacked humanitarian assistance and economic development programs for Latin America. In 2018 and 2019, for example, his administration requested \$ 516 million and \$ 515.9 million respectively for the State Department budget under the heading of the Economic Support and Development Fund for Latin America and the Caribbean (AYERBE, 2019). What is more, he revived the concept of Fair Trade by articulating it with the America First and Buy American campaigns to attack investments of Ford, Carrier, and other large companies in Latin America, especially in Mexico (TRUMP, 2017).

It is clear thus that Trumps represented a conservative approach to allegedly addressing broad and structural socio-economic, political, demographic, and cultural transformations taking place in his country in the last 40 years. Historical parallels can be found in different aspects of what has happened in Latin America in the last decade. Some of these parallels derived from overt US interference. In the next section, we examine these events.

The End of Latin America's Pink Tide and its Recent Democratic Reversal

The recent rise of right-wing regimes in Latin America is part of a global trend of extreme nationalist forces mobilizing to question central elements of Liberal Democracy and the very global multilateral order put in place in the aftermath of World War II. Much of this process derived from the global economic crisis of 2008 though its roots are to be found in the process of financialization of global capitalism consolidated in the last three decades, which came to be known as the neoliberal version of the process of globalization (SITARAMAN, 2019).

The crisis of the global liberal order is a clear expression of a much larger transformations taking place in the economic, social, and now even political bases that had thus far structured the liberal globalization of the last 40 years (IKENBERRY, 2018). In specific, debts, incurred to fuel

the industrialization process in some of the major countries in Latin America in the third quarter of the century, incurred interests and exchange rates adjusted overnight and became unpayable. Thus, under growing pressure from international creditors, governments of the region adopted ingredients from the neoliberal prescription, already established in some countries such as Chile, under the violent dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). Liberalizing economic reforms, although partial and incomplete in several cases, has reduced barriers to the free flow of competing goods and capital and, consequently, has made any autonomous development project unfeasible. This process has underpinnings and manifestations in global, regional, national, and even, many times, sub-national dimensions, but all of which converging in some way in what could be called a generalized malaise of the (neo)liberal democratic logic (SANAHUJA, 2019). In fact, at the turn of the century, leftist critics of neoliberalism managed to come to power across the region. This so-called Pink Tide brought to power new ruling coalitions, often with overt socialist narratives that articulated revived anti-imperialist perspective, though few of them sought to promote deep socialization of the means of production (SANTOS, 2019).

In a general sense, Pink Tide-associated governments sought to recover the role of the State in the face of the market to overcome underdevelopment and promote social equity and adopt an autonomous foreign policy, without, however, in a general sense, directly attacking the capitalist structure itself. Administrations of different veins – from overtly radical left in Venezuela, under Chavez, to moderate center-left in Uruguay, under Pepe Mujica, and Chile, under Michelle Bachelet – have all sought to soften the harshest pain dealt by the process of neoliberalization carried out in the preceding decade. They revived the role of the national State in wealth allocation and expanded public services, especially in health care, food, and education. Moreover through targeted social programs (e.g. *Bolsa Familia*, in Brazil), Pink Tide governments made a difference in assisting the poor. Still few significant strategies were put in

place that challenged the subordinate primary-export position of regional economies in the structures of global Capitalism.

In fact, despite some attempts to implement neo-developmental, Pink Tide's governments have remained dependent on foreign investors who, since the beginning of the 20th century, have maintained a close relationship with partners in the region. It established a privileged space for exporting investments to make a profit from the super-exploitation of labor, mainly in the export sector. As a result, "as the pink tide project unfolded it was increasingly undermined by its own contradictions" (SANKEY, 2016, n.p.). To be sure, growing extractives and assemblage activities increased regional vulnerability to boom-bust cycle, and when declining growth in China happened, starting in 2012, Latin American economies became mired in a new cycle of reduced or negative rates of growth, currency devaluations, and declining fiscal resources (CRUZ; CHOI; HUIDROM, 2015).

Initially, the international context seemed to offer favorable conditions for Pink Tide governments. In specific, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, the United States moved away from the region to focus on the Middle East. US foreign policy towards Latin America was thus unremarkable in terms of major initiatives. And the global acquiescence of the discourse of democracy, albeit illusory and fleeting, offered support to develop more ambitious strategies of national development even under pressure from conservative sectors of national, regional, and global Capitalism. Moreover, without facing a concerted response from the historical hemispheric hegemon, China's rapid emergence as global economic actor provided an alternative partner to Pink Tide governments who also managed to leverage coordinated and complementary political and economic strategies based on intra-regional mechanisms for cooperation and conflict resolution based on the need to manage the crises of previous decades (AYERBE, 2008). This favorable global context was not to last though, leading to dramatic consequences in the region, particularly in Brazil.

In effect, starting in 2008, a new episode of the economic crisis amid the general systemic crisis curbed economic growth in the USA, China, and the European Union. Consequently, global demand for commodities collapsed with huge economic impact in Latin America, particularly from 2012 onwards. Not having overcome structural ties of dependence, Pink Tide coalitions lost economic and thus political strength. Workers, particularly those tied to export sectors, replaced their optimism for continuous improvement of life with a growing pessimism about the future. For the national bourgeoisie, especially in the influential export-tied agribusiness, the expectation for increasing profits gave way to frustration. All in all, with the end of the commodities boom of the first decade of the 21st century, economic activity in Latin America significantly declined –, between 2014 and 2020, growth in the region was the slowest of the last 70 years (COMISIÓN ECONÓMICA PARA AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE, 2019).

Making things even more dramatic, this time around, economic dynamics engulfed the political systems of countries across the region in ways seriously detrimental to the very process of democratic consolidation unfolding since the mid-1980s (SANAHUJA, 2017). In fact, rapidly key segments of the national and transnational bourgeoisie that supported Pink-Tide governments abandoned the arrangement of social classes and joined the international bourgeoisie on a new neoliberal offensive. This scenario withered the political capital and the agglutinating strength of earlier political leaders, who, due to their charismatic and centralizing character, often did not allow offeror viable alternatives to keep in place national, cross-class alliances.

Interestingly, the first wave of anti-Pink Tide regimes in Latin America were overtly neo-liberal but not necessarily clear versions of today's most extreme right-wing populists. This included the administrations of Piñera in Chile (2010-2014), Macri in Argentina (2015-2019), Kuczynski in Perú (2016-2018), Peña Nieto in México (2012-2018), and even Temer in Brasil (2016-2018).

Conversely, the new wave of leaders in many of these countries, perhaps (once again) most clearly in the case of Brazil under Bolsonaro, became quickly aligned with the global trend of authoritarian leaders on the right, led by Trump. In addition to Bolsonaro in Brazil, this included the governments of Duque in Colombia, Bukele in El Salvador, and the brief and illegitimate rule of Anez in Bolivia. All in all, these latest regimes assumed a more nationalist and anti-democratic majoritarian logic, with a strong anti-globalist vein appealing not only to traditional oligarchic segments, but also to conservative, low-middle class sectors increasingly afraid of both economic but also cultural trends (e.g., sexual and racial minority demands and associated rights), allegedly coming from the outside. Likewise, this revived demagoguery and strongly nationalist rhetoric (for the alleged common man), which homogenizes domestic ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, is especially appealing in its *mano dura*, militaristic elements of security against foreign but especially "domestic enemies" (VERDES-MONTENEGRO, 2019).

Similar to these cases, in Brazil, Bolsonaro's first Foreign Minister, Ernesto Araujo mimicked the anti-globalist narrative of the refusal of multilateralism, but his government sustained a clear neoliberal economic agenda. To understand better how these dynamics were played out in the Brazilian, we turn to the next section.

Car Wash Operation and the rise of Bolsonaro in Brazil

Latin America's experiences with the rise of authoritarian right-wing rule is perhaps most evident in Brazil. In effect, increasingly lower socio-economic social segments, accustomed to unprecedented economic gains, in terms of purchasing power, during Lula da Silva's years (2003-2011) came to see his successor, Dilma Rousseff, in the rear when previous benefits could no longer be sustained and started been reversed fast after 2012, as explained in the previous section.

Though not seen since the early 1960s, when conservative social segments took to the streets

in Brazil to demand a military intervention against the socially reformist administration of Goulart, in themselves these events would have a hard time gaining traction on a wider scale. This is where *mano dura*, anti-political correctness, and harsh nationalist rhetoric came to play a major role: the anti-corruption narrative (*clean the swamp*) of the authoritarian right-wing. In effect, the rise of this more authoritarian vein of neoliberalism in Brazil is closely tied to middle and upper middle-classes mobilizations against the social inclusion course of the previous decade, under the banner of anti-corruption (BOITO JUNIOR, 2020).

Going back to the crisis that started engulfing Latin American, in the mid-2010s, in 2013, a broad socio-economic and political crisis hit Brazil hard. Young people took to the streets of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro to protest local government officials due to rising prices for public transport and other services. A fraction of the middle class – which quickly adhered again to the neoliberal creed – became convinced that the police needed to attack the street protests and legitimized the violence. A few months later, the most reactionary fraction of the middle class captured the protests and managed to direct dissatisfaction against the federal government, headed by Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016). They replaced mobilization against tariff increases with acts against corruption and presented the revamped neoliberal model as an ethical and moral solution to problems. Even though in some cases these started in legitimate movements, increasingly the extreme nationalist, at times, overly authoritarian, narrative took center stage (TATAGIBA; TRINDADE; TEIXEIRA, 2015).

In March 2014, the Federal Public Ministry (MPF) launched Operation Car Wash, which unveiled a scheme of lobbying, overbilling, bribes, and evasion of foreign exchange around the construction of public works. Led by former judge Sérgio Moro and prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol, *Car Wash* used abusive arrests as a central element of investigation, applying it on a biased fashion against politicians tied to the Worker's Party administrations, something that, in end, did not address widespread corruption but rather weakened

trust in political institutions. Indeed, Car Wash 'political grammar' attacked core principles of Liberalism-based rule of law (e.g., presumption of innocence) if it could get Brazil rid of the scourge of (leftist) corruption (SILVA, 2020).

Amidst Car Wash Operation, at the end of 2014, Dilma Rousseff nonetheless managed to be re-elected president, with a still-holding center-left coalition. On a tragic irony, this mobilization started in 2015, on the throes of the devise election of October 2014, when their preferred candidate, Aécio Neves, the opposition candidate who run against her on the second round of the election lost but refused to accept the results. This was a clear, shameful and destructive course of action, which was nonetheless widely portrayed by powerful, conservative media conglomerates as a defense of democracy. It needs to be stated, thus, that what was really happening in Brazil then was that "by effectively relying on judicial proceedings to dismantle the PT after losing four straight elections, the opposition ceded considerable political influence to an increasingly partisan judiciary" (IORIS; PAGLIARINI, 2019, p. 2). This type of mobilization gained traction on the bases of a traditional narrative deployed several times in Brazilian history, that of the left being corrupt, which had been revived already in 2006, against Lula, but with his popularity still growing, it came to nothing. In the case of Dilma, with the economy in decline, it did work. These events engulfed Brazil in the most consequential political crisis the country faced since the end of the military regime in the mid-1980s – thus dramatically putting an end to the very process of democratic consolidation Brazil was experiencing.

In effect, in the very first months of her new term, pressed by powerful business and media actors, Rousseff abandoned the anti-cyclical economic policy and the proposals of the presidential campaign committed to the expansion of economic and social citizenship. Rousseff thus adopted an economic policy in tune with clear neoliberal elements, but her overture to domestic capital failed to rebuild ties with the business community, while her image among progressive

sectors melted (SINGER, 2015). As new phases of Operation Car Wash unfolded, middle-class social movements led to several protests against Dilma Rousseff, who ironically was never even included in the investigations. National outrage against her culminated, in mid-year 2016, on parliamentary coup, under the technical frame of a Congressional impeachment due to what was called creative governmental accounting practices (GOMES, 2016).

In the end, the economic and institutional crisis fueled by Operation Car Wash overturned confidence in democratic institutions. As indicated by recurrent measurement provided by Latino-Barometro, in 2000, at the end of the neoliberal wave, 19.2% of Brazilians were satisfied with democracy, and 24.3% of Brazilians trusted the government. Ten years later, on the crest of the pink tide, 48.5% of Brazilians were satisfied with democracy, and 55% of Brazilians trusted the government. In 2013, only 26% of Brazilians were satisfied with democracy, and 38.6% of Brazilians trusted the government. In 2016, Operation Car Wash peaked with 17 phases. That same year, only 9.4% of Brazilians were satisfied with democracy, and 9.4% of Brazilians trusted the government. Two years later, amid new presidential elections, 8.7% of Brazilians were satisfied with democracy, and 7.1% of Brazilians trusted the government (LATINOBAROMETRO, 2023).

Echoing events in the US, the erosion of confidence in government institutions led to the rise of a neoliberal authoritarian *solution* to Brazil's growing problems. The articulation of the anti-left narrative had to be advanced, however, to be effective, under a more subtle and veiled strategy. In fact, as often is the case in Latin America, the neoliberal agenda has a hard time when it reveals its actual tenets – privatization of public services, opening the economy to international capital, elimination of labor gains, etc. Therefore, given that these notions can't gain support among large numbers of voters, a massive rebranding effort to package the neoliberal propositions as solutions to the ordinary people had to be deployed. This is exactly where authoritarian neoliberal populism came into play.

Like Trump, Bolsonaro, a former army captain with a long and meaningless political career, knew how to exploit the dissatisfaction and the collapse of institutions. In the 2018 elections, Bolsonaro offered a political platform with very few proposals, many of them unenforceable. His strength as a contender to the presidency was not in the political platform, but in the symbolic power built-in opposition to the Workers' Party and the policies developed during the Brazilian Pink Tide. He presented himself as a representative of law enforcement and sought the support of Sérgio Moro, as the hero of Car Wash Operation. Bolsonaro also approached Paulo Guedes, a neoliberal economist with extensive experience in the financial market. Likewise, through his sons, he obtained the support of Olavo de Carvalho, a former astrologer who became a political commentator and disseminator of the conservative philosophical tradition through popular and simplistic courses on digital platforms.

Like Trump, Bolsonaro managed to obtain support in the business community, especially in agribusiness, in large national retail corporations, and the financial market. This historical block configured a combination of ultra-conservative elements and neoliberalism, which: reflected the appeal to law and moral order as a response to urban violence and a supposed moral degeneration of society and institutions; and echoed confidence in the market as an anti-corruptive and competent economic agent to expand economic and social citizenship. What is more, Bolsonaro successfully appealed to popular sectors with his anti-establishment narrative of *tem que mudar tudo isso aí!* (we have to change everything). In advancing a dualistic narrative – good vs. evil – he accelerated the very erosion of confidence in the existing democratic political system, leading to his successful (and tragic) bid for the presidency of the country (DAMASCENO, 2018).

Beyond the idiosyncratic historical parallels that can be found between Trump and Bolsonaro, how did these transformative political dynamics impact the course of Brazil-US relations in the last few years? To critically examine these matters, we turn to the following section.

Brazil-US Relations under Right-Wing leaders

Notwithstanding nuances provided by regional or global dynamics, Brazilian foreign policy has sustained a stable course defined by the goal of advancing the countries developmental interests. Since the turn of the 20th century, this involved strengthening ties, though not necessarily closing ranks with the region rising hegemon and Brazil's main economic partner, the United States. But despite some established claims that Brazil-US relations have been defined by a strategic informal alliance, the fact is that while both nations have managed to sustain a long course of interaction for over a century, their relationship has been significantly shaped moving and, in practice, largely unresolved terms (BURNS, 1966).

In any case, Brazilian diplomatic underpinning in the course of the last century have involved the defense of non-interventionism, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and multilateralism. These cornerstones of the Brazilian diplomacy have been present in regimes of different ideological orientation and social compositions. This is what makes so remarkable Bolsonaro's ideologically grounded, subservient alignment with the US under Trump, which has yet to deliver on its promises (IORIS, 2019).

To be sure, Bolsonaro's foreign policy sought to undo not only what he saw as the behavior and approaches pursued during PT's Years, but also main elements of the country's diplomacy from at least the 1980s, such as regional engagement with regional neighbors, promotion of human right and environmental protection. Bolsonaro's foreign policy has challenged Brazil's universalistic and institutionally engaged diplomatic tradition with demagoguery critics on the global multilateral liberal order, said to be a threat to national interests, as well as in its subservient alignment with the US, terms loudly voiced in particularly by the first Foreign Minister, Ernesto Araujo.

The mobilization anti-PT in 2015 onwards incorporated criticism of Lula and Dilma diplomatic openness to new economic partners across the globe, especially in the Global South. Suppos-

edly, PT's foreign policy would have abandoned a partnership with the US in favor of new partners. It is clearly a false claim. Indeed, it should be also recalled that, in fact, Lula's international activism was not based on replacing historical alliances or partnership but rather expanding into ones, such as BRICS and IBSA. Conversely, after Dilma's casuistic impeachment, the country's foreign policy has sustained a reframing towards a privileged overture towards the US (COELHO; SANTOS, 2017). This course of events, among other similarities between the two administrations of the post-parliamentarian coup of 2016 scenario, spilled over from Temer onto Bolsonaro, though the latter certainly deepened it along much more ideological basis.

In effect, from Temer to Bolsonaro, Brazil's foreign policy went from a situation that has described as "passive subordination" to the US to a more concerning situations of "overt subordination" (BERRINGER *et al.*, 2021). Bolsonaro's realignment with the US has also involved the weakening of regional projects and institutions in South America, consolidated under PT's Years, such as Union of South American Nations (USAN) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). Moreover, Bolsonaro promoted a more confrontational perception of its neighbors, especially Venezuela but also Bolivia and even of its most important regional economic partner, Argentina (BOLSONARO..., 2019).

Furthermore, and especially relevant, Brazil-US relations assumed centrality under Bolsonaro/Araújo, the author of "Trump e o Ocidente," where in the former Minister portrayed Trump as the ultimate defender of Western Civilization against the perils of an alleged anti-family and anti-Christian nefarious politically correct, globalist mentality taking over all structures of power in multilateral agencies across the globe (ARAUJO, 2017). Thus, along uniquely concerning conceptual lines, Bolsonaro and his advisers reformulated the Cold War National Security Doctrine, resurrecting the figure of the internal enemy – the dangerous communist – which now includes all those who defend a project to expand economic and

social citizenship in which the State is the main instrument for mitigating poverty and promoting social, racial and gender equity. What is more, this strategy allowed Bolsonaro to adopt a new concept for the defense of democracy, in which he can take authoritarian measures based on the preservation of Western civilization and the fight against communism.

In tandem with a subordinate alignment with the US under Trump, Araújo directed Brazilian foreign policy towards automatic alignment with the Trump administration, causing fractures in the relationship with partners in Latin America, Europe, and Asia. In particular, the now disgrace Foreign Minister gave harsh criticism to China, the largest trading partner of Brazil. In 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Araújo, emulating Trump, coined the term "Comunavirus" in reference to China. According to Araújo, the "Comunavirus" would accelerate the "globalist project":

This [globalist project] has already been carried out through climaticism or climate alarmism, gender ideology, politically correct dogmatism, immigration, racialism or reorganization of society based on the principle of race, antinationalism, scientism, these are efficient instruments, but the pandemic, placing individuals and societies in the face of the impending death panic, represents the aggrandizement of all of them. (O GLOBO, 2021, n.p.).

On March 19, 2019, Bolsonaro visited Trump at the White House. On the occasion, Bolsonaro revealed all admiration for Trump and the United States: "I have always admired the United States of America. And this sense of admiration has just increased after you took office and the Presidency" (BOLSONARO, 2019 apud TRUMP, 2019). The meeting sealed the two central axes of relations between the US and Brazil in the period: defense, mainly Brazilian support to contain the supposed communist threat in the region, Venezuela; and trade. According to Bolsonaro (2019 apud TRUMP, 2019, n.p.):

[...] may I say that Brazil and the United States stand side by side in their efforts to ensure liberties and respect to traditional family lifestyles, respect to God our Creator, against the gender ideology or the politically correct attitudes, and against fake news.

On the US side, shortly after Bolsonaro's victory, John Bolton, National Security Advisor from 2018 to 2019, celebrated the election of leaders with ideas similar to those of the American president to boost the free market and fight socialism on the continent, especially the influence of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. According to Bolton:

The recent elections of likeminded leaders in key countries, including Ivan Duque in Colombia, and last weekend Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, are positive signs for the future of the region, and demonstrate a growing regional commitment to free-market principles, and open, transparent, and accountable governance. Yet today, in this Hemisphere, we are also confronted once again with the destructive forces of oppression, socialism, and totalitarianism. (BOLTON, 2018 apud TRUMP, 2018, n.p.).

Proceeding on their professed though largely unfulfilled partnership, Bolsonaro's Brazil and Trump's US carried out several fronts. On defense, Trump promised to designate Brazil as a Major non-NATO ally (MNNA). In practice, as an MNNA, Brazil could buy US strategic military equipment, training, and technologies in a preferred way. So, Brazil can access cutting-edge military technology to defend the sub-continent from the imaginary advance of Venezuelan communism. However, it established the expectation of automatic alignment between Brazil and the USA concerning international tensions in other regions. Consequently, it could drag Brazil into the throes with important trading partners in the Middle East and China at a time of growing stress over the Pacific (MELLO, 2019a).

Trump appreciated Bolsonaro's support for Juan Guaidó – proclaimed president of Venezuela by the National Assembly in 2018 – after considering Nicholas Maduro's electoral victory illegitimate. Bolsonaro stated that: "The dictatorial regime in Venezuela today is part of a broader international coalition, known as the São Paulo Forum, which nearly conquered power throughout the Latin America in recent times" (BOLSONARO, 2019 apud TRUMP, 2019, n.p.). But Despite Bolsonaro's willingness and some military exercises on the border between Brazil and Venezuela, the commanders of the Brazilian Armed Forces

denied any possibility of participating in military action to overthrow Maduro. Twenty days after the Bolsonaro and Trump meeting, Hamilton Mourão – retired General of the Brazilian Army and Vice President of Brazil – and Mike Pence – US. Vice President – met to address the issue of Venezuela. After the meeting, Mourão guaranteed that Brazil and the US would not carry out any military intervention in Venezuela (MELLO, 2019b).

Likewise, in their first official meeting, in March 2019, the two countries signed a Technology Safeguards Agreement, which guaranteed the US access to the Alcantara Military Base – in the state of Maranhão in Northeast of Brazil – to carry out launch activities for spacecraft, satellites, and artifacts in space. At the Alcantara Military Base, a launch vehicle uses 30% less fuel because it is situated two degrees from the Equator Line. On the agreement, American private companies like SpaceX can also make launches. Bolsonaro government expects to raise about \$ 25 million a year from the deal. However, Brazil will not have access to American technology (VALENTE, 2018). What is more, in the final months of 2020, 50 days before the US presidential elections, Mike Pompeo – United States Secretary of State from 2018-2021 – visited the border between Brazil and Venezuela and met with refugees with support from the Brazilian government. During the visit, Pompeo announced that the US government would allocate \$30 million to finance Brazilian humanitarian aid programs for Venezuelan immigrants, especially "Operation Welcomed", administered by the Brazilian army. Brazilian senators and deputies saw the visit of Pompeo as an electoral and provocative gesture that put Brazilian sovereignty at risk. According to the motion of a group of opposition parliamentarians:

It is unacceptable that President Donald Trump's government intends to make use of Brazilian territory, in particular facilities of Operation Welcomed, of a humanitarian nature, as the stage of a political party campaign, marked by an ostensible manifestation of hostility to Venezuela, in an affront to rules and regulations of the Brazilian and international legal system. (FREY, 2020, n.p.).

On trade, at the March 2019 meeting, Trump promised to support Brazil's entry into the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Araújo took Brazil's entry into the OECD as the main objective of foreign policy aligned with the US. Brazil requested to join the organization in 2017 under Michel Temer (2016-2019). However, the position of the USA has slowed Brazil's intentions. Bolsonaro guaranteed that Brazil was complying with all – neoliberal – measures. But after the meeting with Bolsonaro in March, Trump did not effectively support Brazil's entry into the OECD (RODRIGUES, 2019). Moreover, in addition to joining the OECD, Araújo and Bolsonaro longed for a free trade agreement between Brazil and the US, even though they needed the consent of all members of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). Under the premise of Fair Trade, in 2018 and 2019, Trump raised import tariffs on aluminum and steel by 10% and 25%, respectively (URIBE, 2019). What is more, after negotiating with the Government Trump, the Bolsonaro government managed exchange rates on semi-finished steel products by quotas equivalent to the average of exports of the previous three years. However, in August 2020, the Trump administration reduced quotas by 83% (GARCIA; SALOMÃO, 2020).

Much in the same way, the Trump administration has not eased the barriers to the entry of Brazilian sugar into the United States. Likewise, in 2019, Bolsonaro's government adopted a series of commercial measures to favor American wheat producers, creating friction with Argentina, the main supplier of wheat to Brazil (GOVERNO..., 2019). Furthermore, the Bolsonaro government extended and increased the duty-free import quota for ethanol from 600 million liters to 750 million liters. What is more, Bolsonaro's administration abdicated the status of "developing country" in the World Trade Organization (WTO), renouncing the benefits that could claim in negotiations with rich countries, such as a better margin of protection for national products (BRASIL..., 2019).

Before Covid-19's global pandemic, exports of goods and services from Brazil to the U.S. grew

slightly in the first year of the Bolsonaro government from \$ 36.88 billion in 2018 to \$ 37.60 billion in 2019. U.S. goods and services exports to Brazil also grew slightly from \$ 66.26 billion in 2018 to \$ 67.27 billion in 2019. As a result, the U.S. trade of goods and services surplus over Brazil grew from \$ 29, 38 to \$ 29.67 in the period. In 2020, the last year of the Trump administration, partly due to the Corona Virus pandemic, exports of goods and services from the U.S. to Brazil stood at \$ 49.9 billion, a 25.8% fall if compared to the previous year. Brazilian exports reached \$ 28.9 billion, a decrease of 23.2%. As a result, the US trade surplus with Brazil fell to \$ 21.0 billion (BUREAU OF ECONOMIC ANALYSIS, 2021). On March 7, 2020, Bolsonaro and Trump met again, this time in Florida. One more time, Trump announced that the U.S. would provide support for Brazil to "begin the process" of joining the OECD. Trump and Bolsonaro decided to deepen the discussions for a bilateral trade package to intensify the economic partnership between Brazil and U.S. Both were able to resume negotiations on an agreement that had been going on since 2011 (RODRIGUES, 2020).

Then, in October, representatives from Brazil and the USA signed three protocols to streamline and expand trade: Trade Facilitation and Customs Cooperation; Good Regulatory Practices; and Anti-corruption. None of the protocols has a tariff impact, but it does reach technical standards and procedures that can make the import and export process cheaper in both countries. In addition, at the same meeting, Trump promised to include Brazil in the "America Crece" Program, which sought to leverage \$150 billion in investments in the infrastructure sector in Latin America and the Caribbean, connecting American companies with governments in the region (BUREAU OF ECONOMIC ANALYSIS, 2021). These many professed new efforts notwithstanding, few of them managed to deliver significant changes for the bilateral relations between the two countries. And, in fact, what we saw was that despite his grandiose eloquence about being Brazil's most nationalist leader in a generation, the fact was that

Bolsonaro did not manage to be taken seriously, let alone as a priority, even by the one country he decided to be the focus of his diplomatic efforts.

Concluding Remarks: Though Abated, Challenges Remain

As overt expressions of a broader crisis in the functioning of Liberal democracy, Bolsonaro and Trump never really meant to redress the underpinning of democratic governance, but rather sought to reinvent neoliberalism, now under an overly authoritarian frame. Moreover, in terms of their relations, which at first seemed to be a perfect match, adding insult to injury, under Bolsonaro, Brazil effectively forfeited a path of sovereign bargaining and reaffirmed its subordinate role under an automatic line of alignment with the United States. The fact that this was done when that country was under the rule of its most exotic politician in the modern era further confirms Bolsonaro's failed diplomatic efforts and Brazil's diminished relevance in the world.

So the tale was that though what seemed to be a perfect *marriage made in hell* of two authoritarian leaders that claimed to be able to redefine the course of their countries – and, in the specific case of bilateral relations between the United States and Brazil, to rearrange diplomatic relations so that straight alignment would be established –, the fact is that neither delivered on their neo-fascist, easy-fix, top-down solutions. And the weight of history and of the long-term national interests of each nation had the upper hand.

Still, even if neither Trump nor Bolsonaro managed to be reelected, the fact remains that authoritarian solutions to current complex institutional political challenges still exert strong influence in their countries, as well as beyond. In effect, it seems likely that that Neo-Fascist alternatives will remain a central factor in defining the directions of democracy, and politics more broadly, in the world in the foreseeable future. Understanding it and resisting it are therefore central tasks for all of those interested in maintaining and improving democratic governance in the upcoming years.

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