

The lesson of Brazil - The scenarios. Dark spots of the left. Tomorrow's challenges

Monday 5 November 2018, by [BEAUDET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 29 October 2018).

Pierre Beaudet, an editor of *Nouveaux Cahiers du Socialisme* [1], is a long-standing member of the International Council of the World Social Forum, which first met in 2001 in Porto Alegre, just a year before the Workers Party (PT) was elected to the presidency of Brazil. The WSF has met almost annually since then in Brazil and occasionally in other countries. Prof. Beaudet wrote this article the day after the October 28 election of the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil, winning 55% over the PT's 45%. It was first published in *Presse-toi à gauche* [2]. My translation.

Richard Fidler

Contents

- [The lesson of Brazil](#)
- [Thinking further](#)

The lesson of Brazil

The catastrophe — expected and foreseeable — has happened. This immense country, with its 200 million inhabitants, is now in darkness. At best, it will take a decade or two to emerge.



Students in São Paulo debating resistance to Bolsonaro after the election. (Pic: Margarida Salomão on Twitter)

The 'Colombian model'

It is of course very early to predict what will happen, but the election of the fascist Bolsonaro raises two possibilities. The "optimists," if one can put it that way, think that a kind of Colombian-style regime will emerge: authoritarian, militarized, using targeted repression against certain sectors of

the popular movement with the consent if not support of a vast sector of the middle and popular classes. In Colombia, under Álvaro Uribe's rule, the state was reinforced and restabilized, benefiting from the militarist excesses of the FARC. Today, Colombia emerges as a small regional power with a façade of democracy, a fragmented opposition, and a solid alliance between the various reactionary factions, not to mention the unfailing support of the United States. In that country they assassinate, kidnap, destroy the opposition, but they leave it a small place in a well-organized system that rules out any change. Has history come to an end in Colombia? Of course not, it never does. Also, Brazil is not Colombia. The popular movement did not become militarized. It still enjoys broad electoral support (45% of the votes), foundations in the institutions, states (provinces) and municipalities. All that cannot be destroyed overnight. However...

The pessimistic scenario

Bolsonaro expresses the hope of sectors that are truly fascist, not only authoritarian. The president-elect said it himself, he wants to "exterminate" the left. Which could mean several things, such as a "purge" of the public service, education and the cultural milieu, as the Turkish dictator has done in his own way. But there is worse yet. In the Brazilian case it will be necessary to break vast popular movements, including in the first place the powerful landless peasants movement, the MST. For three decades this movement has sunk roots in various rural sectors, with an organized network of establishments, cooperatives and institutions. Although not obtaining the agrarian reform it sought from its allies in the Workers Party (PT), the MST has established itself in some regions as a mini "state within the state," with hundreds of thousands of members. Bolsonaro has said he will "clean them up" with the support of the powerful agrobusiness sector, local notables and popular sectors fueled by junk media and the evangelical churches. The MST, which fortunately has never toyed with the militarist option, will have a hard time withstanding the shock, unless other popular sectors join with it to build a sort of anti-fascist front. For the moment, that's unlikely. The trade-union movement, including the CUT, which gave birth to the PT, is virtually paralyzed, in large part by the frontal assault on the workers in recent years and the impact of "globalization." Reorienting toward primary resource extraction and agrobusiness, Brazilian capitalism concluded that a working class organized in industry and public services was due for slaughter.

The next challenges of the fascist project

There are still many unknowns in the equation. Urban popular sectors are not, at least in the short term, in a position to mobilize, partly because of the dense network of evangelicals. The PT has for several years lost ground in the favelas. The "middle" layers, including a large petty-bourgeoisie that is relatively comfortable in the state apparatus, education and the media, are neutralized. The big bourgeoisie, initially rather hostile to Bolsonaro, is ready to "play the game," especially if the new president will undertake the dismantling of the social sector of the state, which will mean lower taxes (which are already very low). In Europe, at the turn of the 1930s, the dominant sectors in Germany and elsewhere lined up behind the fascists, albeit with some reluctance. The popular movements and unions, well organized and implanted, were not in a position to resist. Admittedly, Brazil and today's world are not Germany and the traumatized Europe of the 1930s. One of Bolsonaro's challenges will be to prove to the ruling classes that he actually can govern, which means consolidating and worsening neoliberal policies in line with the interests of the big bourgeoisie and imperialism. On the other hand, managing his repressive policy by avoiding "excesses" (too many massacres, too much racism and homophobia), while putting in place a very repressive system. It is easier said than done.

The shock

At this point, everyone is in shock. The natural reflex is to point to the dreadful manipulation of the

right, through the use of the media, elite corruption and repression. That's completely true. The election campaign that just ended illustrates the tremendous slippage of the current liberal democracies, and not only in Brazil (think of the United States). There is a strong tendency to turn politics into a huge show where anything can be said. One might have thought, however, that the left, the PT and the popular movements should have seen it coming. The victory of a fascist comes two years after President Dilma Rousseff was overthrown in a "constitutional" coup, the logical and natural consequence of which was Lula's imprisonment. Even before that, in 2013, the right had taken the initiative by organizing real mass movements in the street to confront the inanities of the PT government, unable to tame the repression and reorient the country to the needs of the people instead of mounting megalomaniac projects (the Olympics, among others). With various media, police and judicial operations, the PT apparatus found itself in hot water. These episodes, events, scandals and other phenomena have of course been reflected in and mobilized by a highly-organized Right in Brazil, deeply embedded in the state apparatus, "armed" by a vast coterie of "service" intellectuals and firmly seated in a racist and reactionary culture that is the legacy of 500 years of social apartheid and slavery.

Dark spots of the left

That being said, it is necessary to look elsewhere. A product of the great workers and democratic struggles of the 1980s, the PT emerged from oblivion with a project of emancipation that boasted some new features. The need to "democratize the democracy" and redistribute wealth to the popular sectors resulted in a broadly attractive and arguably hegemonic project. This kind of "not so quiet revolution" seemed an ideal way to change this country without too many clashes and grinding of teeth. Once elected in 2012 after a decade of slow and partial victories, the PT enjoyed a state of grace, spurred by an economic boom propelled by rising resource prices. This giant country of agrobusiness and mining and petroleum industries amassed a lot of money, and this allowed Lula and his government to redistribute part of the wealth without harming the interests of the better-off sectors. They were never supporters of the PT but they could tolerate it with the thought that the new governance had the effect of pacifying popular demands and moderating more radical sectors. For example, PT governments continued to refuse the major demand of the MST to implement an extensive agrarian reform, thereby reinforcing the power of agrobusiness, the most dynamic sector of Brazilian capitalism. The same thing can be said for the political system.

Shortly after Lula's election, some dissident sectors had dared to take their distance by insisting that no real change could occur in Brazil without a ruthless fight against a thoroughly rotten political system. Elected officials at all levels, civil servants, members of the judiciary and the repressive apparatus were gangrened by perverted manipulative practices and a corresponding ideology in which the supreme principle is personal profit, anchored in a deep hatred of the people. Lula and the PT leadership simply chose to live with this system.

Contaminated decontaminants

It is sometimes said that it is systems that make the people and not the people who make the systems. That's a bit generalizing, but it's still true. Around the small nucleus that had piloted the PT to the top of the state there was a small army of "cadres and competents," mostly militants who had spent years fighting in the unions, the municipalities, in education and the media. These cadres and skilled elements had some means, a little education, some capacities and naturally they became the backbone of the new power. For many, they did so with honesty, even selflessness, in conditions that were often difficult. For others, this transformation represented a real ascension in the social order. A trade unionist suddenly promoted to chief of staff or director of a parapublic company doubled or even tripled his income. This did not mean that he became "rotten" overnight, but it was not inconsequential either.

Apart from the MST, which remained a special case, the popular movements were largely “decapitated” by the exodus of these “cadres and competents” who were the guiding spirits in the unions and many other movements. Once ensconced in the state apparatus, they found themselves de facto in a new situation in which there was still some complicity with the popular movements but also, gradually and increasingly, some distance. Inevitably, the new managers were contaminated by the culture of opacity, manipulation, and even disdain that has built this country for 500 years. They found many more arguments to do nothing than to the contrary. They did not listen to the dissident voices who said the PT was sitting on a sand castle, without reconstructing an economy that is totally unequal and dependent, without confronting the 1% and the 10% who continued to grow rich, without waging a resolute battle against the huge reactionary media empire and the perverse influence of the evangelicals. The gap between the PT and the popular layers became apparent in 2013 when the people took to the streets to denounce the increases in transit fares and megalomaniac projects. But the left plugged its ears. A decisive moment, this convinced a multi-hued Right to go into action.

Tomorrow's challenges

Brazil will experience some very dark days and we will have to support our comrades to the best of our ability — for example, by keeping a close watch on the actions of the Canadian state and Canadian businesses that will choose to collaborate with the fascists. [3] In the short term, the Brazilian movements will try to do two things at the same time. They will resist, they have no choice. They will also debate, to try to understand, to unravel their contradictions. It is likely that the leaders of the PT, Lula in the lead, will choose the path of least resistance, of retreat, waiting for the return of things without shaking the cage too much. They will say, with some reason, that this is the only possible choice, that the relationship of forces is too unfavourable. They will blame the people and the popular movements instead of accepting their responsibilities in the debacle. But there will be others who will try, in conditions of great adversity, to hold out as the MST will likely do. We have to stand by them.

Thinking further

Like many countries of the “pink wave” in Latin America, Brazil was an important laboratory of left renewal. The importance this has meant in getting the left out of its vanguardist ruts, the misplaced legacy of a petrified and harmful “Marxism-Leninism,” cannot be under-stated. But the present defeats also weigh heavily. What should we make of them? The rise of an electoral left is not the goal, it is not how we will change society. It is a means, and again a means that involves many risks. Many indeed. There is the problem mentioned above of the “cadres and competents” who ensconce themselves in relative comfort, abandoning the popular movements from which they came. There are the pitfalls of a “political game” where you pretend to make decisions while the real levers of power are well hidden in the interstices of the banks and large corporations. There are the enormous risks of actually confronting the systems of power knowing very well their capacity to destroy, manipulate, annihilate.

Act now

Faced with all this, it is necessary to resist the pseudo-projects of “fleeing from politics,” taking refuge in comfort zones where one can dream of experiencing society on a very small scale. Anticipatory projects such as cooperatives, mini-communes or whatever are important. But it is not that, in itself, that will break the power. So we have no choice but to go into the swamp, knowing what to expect. At a time when Québec solidaire hopes to change the state of affairs, we can be both

happy and cautious. It will be interesting to see whether the innovations that served QS so well are furthered, so that we can avoid potential slippages. For example,

- The party must remain a place of active and lively debate, and not be content to sink into facile formulas that may be electorally advantageous but may eventually create the illusion that we can change things without making changes. At QS we are not at that point but there is a small risk that the appetite for an electoral breakthrough will bring us down.
- Our MNAs and “cadres and competents,” which will increase tenfold in the next period, must accept — as Manon [Massé], Gabriel [Nadeau-Dubois], Amir [Khadir] and others have done — that they are not the “owners” of QS. Nor should they create a situation in which their material situation departs too much from that of their electorate. Here’s an idea: why not establish a rule that elected members put 10% of their income at the disposal of the social movements, and thus outside of their control? 10% of their income? [4] A kind of “popular tax” for the movements that are the backbone of the transformation.
- The party’s resources should be decentralized, not “captured” at the top by “advisors,” whether experts or not, whose role is to support the elected members. Yes, the MNAs need some in order to perform their parliamentary work, but QS is not just that. Advisors should not be “gate-keepers” preventing the membership from participating effectively in the debate. The big difference for QS, and not only for the next election, is dynamic associations that can build convergence with the mass movements. Theme-based commissions and committees will produce popular education tools and analyses on the burning issues of the day, and not just answers for this or that parliamentary committee.

Changing society entails a relentless, determined, struggle against an implacable adversary that must be neutralized if it is not to neutralize us.

Pierre Beaudet, October 29, 2018

P.S.

- Life on the Left, Sunday, November 4, 2018:
<http://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2018/11/the-lesson-of-brazil.html>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.cahiersdusocialisme.org>

[2] Available on ESSF (article 46747), [La leçon du Brésil – les scénarios, les angles noirs de la gauche, les défis de demain](#). A shorter version was published in *Le Devoir* [<https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/idees/540291/le-bresil-de-bolsonaro-sur-la-breche>]

[3] CBC News was quick off the mark: “For Canadian business, a Bolsonaro presidency could open new investment opportunities, especially in the resource sector, finance and infrastructure, as he has pledged to slash environmental regulations in the Amazon rainforest and privatize some government-owned companies.” Later, in response to mass protests, the public broadcaster

retreated, while insisting that “it is a well researched and sourced analysis piece about one aspect of that election.” – RF.

[4] Such a “tax” could easily produce \$100,000 per year, or close to a half million by the end of a mandate. It could be used to establish a foundation, independent of QS, that could manage these funds while ensuring their permanence.