

# Welcome to Brazil?

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## **The opening speech of the Systemic Alternatives symposium of social movements (Itaipava RJ, Brazil, 7-9 April 2019)**

As many of you may be aware, Brazil is currently undergoing an enormous crisis. In this country of 207.7 million people, six millionaires possess more wealth than 100 million Brazilians. Inequality in Brazil is not just about income – it's also about opportunities: 0.5% of the economically-active population concentrates 43% of the wealth. The rich people do not pay much tax, because 51% of tax receipts in Brazil come from consumption taxes. As a result, the middle and working classes pay the majority of taxes in one of the most economically-unequal countries in the world.

In addition, in 2016, Brazil went through a coup d'état. Social policies have been dismantled and social rights that were conquered decades ago have been eliminated, culminating in [former president] Lula's imprisonment, without evidence, at a moment when he was leading the polls in the 2018 elections. Despite the intervention of the UN Commission on Human Rights and many other international organizations, Lula was not entitled to a fair trial and could not run the elections. He's been in jail for a year already.

There is an alarming criminalisation of social movements and a wave of assassinations of activists. Brazil's new Anti-Terror Law (a creation of the armed forces), arbitrary arrests, the assassination of indigenous, black movement and social movement leaders as well as human rights defenders clearly show the new context we are living in. More than a year ago, activist and Rio da Janeiro city councillor Marielle Franco and her driver Anderson Pedro Gomez were killed. So far, it isn't clear who exactly ordered this assassination. But we know for certain that her murderers are related to right-wing militias and to President Bolsonaro's family. Marielle was a left-wing councillor who denounced police violence in Rio's slums. She was black, lesbian and came from a favela (urban poor community).

Brazil's new president Jair Bolsonaro openly celebrates the memory of the former right-wing dictatorship. He calls Brazilian living abroad 'tramps.' We, those who struggle for our rights, are 'terrorists.' Every day, people like you and me are arrested, when peacefully demonstrating for social rights. And, worst of all, we do not have the support of many of our fellow Brazilians.

The first act of the Bolsonaro government was to change the law on possession of firearms. The reform allows all people living in states with a homicide rate of more than 10 per 100,000 inhabitants to have up to four firearms at home. At this time, all Brazilian states fit this description. In other words, the new permission allows multiple gun ownership absolutely everywhere in Brazil. Another decision taken without debate with civil society and with parliament is the decree signed by the vice-president modifying the law that regulates the constitutional right of access to public information. The new decree allows civil servants to classify public data as 'ultra-secret,' which prevents public access for a period of 25 years. Previously, this classification was exceptional, and could only be done by the president and vice-president, ministers of state, commanders of the armed forces and heads of diplomatic missions abroad.

Other actions such as Brazil's withdrawal from the UN Global Compact for Migration and the closure of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, responsible for the regulation of relations between employers and employees, makes it clear how this Government sees working people. Indigenous peoples are among the most affected by this new government. As well as approving the concession of protected land to mining projects, the Ministry of Agriculture has obtained the power

to identify, delimit and demarcate the land of indigenous peoples and quilombolas [communities of descendants of runaway slaves]. Historically, this process has always been a great conflict between natives, quilombolas and agribusiness. Now that everything is centralized in the same federal agency, which is run by a minister who led the agribusiness group in congress, the conditions for blocking agribusiness and protecting our land rights are more difficult. These measures will certainly increase violence in rural areas. We must expect more assassinations of indigenous people and other activists.

In addition, in March 2019, Provisional Measure 870/2019 created a new competence for the Secretariat of Government: "to supervise, coordinate and monitor the activities and actions of international organizations and non-governmental organizations in the national territory." This goes against the Federal Constitution which guarantees freedom of association for lawful purposes and the prohibition of state interference in the functioning of associations. Undoubtedly this act will generate an increase of legislative and regulatory control, and increase insecurity for NGOs and other civil society organizations in Brazil.

In this context, Brazilians feel lost. Many of them blame 'politics,' as if all problems related to the deprivation of right and corruption were connected to the exercise of politics as such. Meanwhile, mayors, councillors, and members of the state and federal legislatures make decisions that do not serve the interest of the general population.

The country is completely under the control of private power interests. Officially, 54% of elected members of the national congress have received campaign donations from large corporations involved in real estate speculation, which means that the interests defended are corporate ones. The real proportion of such politicians is much higher. Private developers are acquiring more power. They finance election campaigns as a kind of speculative investment and they ensure that public resources are directed to their own priorities, rather than being invested into health, education and better living conditions for the population. So, inequality ends up being a political project. In order to tackle and reduce inequality, one must reduce privileges. But who wants their privileges to be reduced?

We lack the education to understand which groups are oppressing us. To understand that only through collective action we can defend ourselves. We lack empathy. Meanwhile, inequality is still being used as a political project to maintain the privileges of a few people. We urgently need to come together.

These days of debate are organised because we see that in different parts of the world we are facing the same questions. And we are collectively exploring the systemic alternatives that can bring a structural shift. Our keywords include precious concepts like care, union, struggle, happiness, persistence, empowerment and diversity. Our strategies come from our collective struggle and our resistance to a model that does not understand our differences, does not respect the other, tramples on our rights, and destroys our planet. Nevertheless, as Paulo Freire said, in a country like Brazil, keeping hope alive is a revolutionary action.

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**P.S.**

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