

Brazil's Ultra-Politics

Thursday 23 May 2019, by [FERNANDES Sabrina](#), [FOGEL Benjamin](#), [HOCHULI Alex](#) (Date first published: 7 October 2018).

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In Brazil's election this weekend, democracy itself is at stake. Far-right [Jair Bolsonaro](#) leads the first-round polls by ten points. In simulations of a second-round runoff, Bolsonaro is neck-and-neck with the Workers Party's (PT) [Fernando Haddad](#), former president Lula's anointed successor. While this may look like another case of the "populist wave" sweeping the globe, the situation is even more grave.

Both domestic media in Brazil as well as foreign papers have tried to frame the election as "a contest between populists from the far left and right," as the *Financial Times* put it. It is hugely misleading to draw any equivalency between these two candidates.

Haddad is most known for painting bike lanes; Bolsonaro defends torture. As São Paulo mayor, Haddad won the Bloomberg Philanthropies "Mayors Challenge" in 2016; Bolsonaro recently threatened to machine gun Workers Party supporters while on the campaign trail and claimed he will not respect any election result in which he is not the winner.

And yet, the great and the good in Brazil rely on this false equivalency so as to sit on the fence. Many indeed support Bolsonaro as a viable alternative to the PT. The middle and upper classes are so blinded by hatred of the center-left PT — a sentiment called *antipetismo* — that they toy with authoritarianism. It's as if the typical Hillary or Macron voter were backing Trump or Le Pen. The Brazilian *real* rises against the dollar the likelier a Bolsonaro presidency looks. Owners of billion-dollar-a-year-turnover department stores and clothing retailers back him, as do bosses of upscale restaurants and hotels.

A debate has consequently emerged on the Brazilian left as to whether Bolsonaro is a "fascist." Racist, misogynist, homophobic and pro-violence he may be, but his neoliberal economic proposals did not make him a fascist, argued political scientist Pablo Ortellado in a newspaper column. Instead, he should be better understood as a conservative culture warrior. It is true that much of Bolsonaro's support comes from evangelicals and his online keyboard army loves to rail against "cultural Marxism." But this is not the nucleus of a putative "Bolsonarism."

The corporatist, nationalist economic policies of interwar fascism were conjunctural. What matters is the question of class domination. In today's times, a neofascism could also seek domination through extreme neoliberalism. Bolsonaro's chief economic adviser, Chicago Boy [Paulo Guedes](#) wants to "privatize everything." Moreover, Bolsonaro proposes something beyond a conservative nationalism and its vision of a patriarchal, white, heteronormative, hierarchical, and homogenous society.

The core of Bolsonarism is hatred of the organized working class, of trade unions, which today — despite the absence of the threat of socialist revolution — is incarnated in PT and, above all, in the image of Lula. Fascism is, at root, a radical bourgeois solution that consists in not just defeating, but also annihilating, the working class; it is recourse to civil war. It is the enlisting of the middle class,

in the ultimate interests of capital, by means of an organized party that idolizes violence, in a war for the absolute domination of the masses.

This is what is known as ultra-politics. It posits an irresolvable conflict in society; the only solution is the annihilation of the enemy. As of yet, though, Bolsonaro may lack an adequate political vehicle. His party is weak, most of his supporters are driven by hatred of PT and or are evangelical conservatives, not fascists. However, he is surrounded by military officers of the highest rank who share his ideas. Should he win, they will be in power. Should he lose, they may not tolerate a fifth PT victory in a row.

On this topic, *Jacobin* has produced a special podcast episode with Aufhebunga Bunga, the “global politics podcast at the end of history.” [Click here](#) to listen to *Jacobin* contributing editors Sabrina Fernandes and Benjamin Fogel discuss, with contributor Alex Hochuli, Brazil’s ultra-politics and the possibilities for resistance, starting with the mass #EleNão (Not Him) feminist demonstrations that started last week and are set to continue as the main hub of the anti-Bolsonaro movement.

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