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TURNING THE CLOCK BACK: ORDER, PROGRESS, LOVE IN 21ST CENTURY BRAZIL

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Abstract

This article presents a case study (nationalistic resurgence in Brazil) in order to analyzing ongoing changes at domestic politics and foreign relations in Brazil across the last 35 years. It portrays a qualitative analysis informed by a bibliographic revision of the aforementioned topics. After the 2008 crisis the side-effects of globalization have been certified by resurgent populisms with a nationalistic bent – with Donald Trump's election providing a benchmark in this respect. We propose that – in spite of Jair Bolsonaro's sudden ascent in 2018 – Brazil do not readily fit into this picture of global turmoil. Nationalism is a constitutive feature of the Brazilian polis. It remained an untapped resource across the first decades of the new century – triggered by the crisis, well ahead Trump's election. The 2008 crisis curtailed Brazil's rise as a globalized emerging power. The political constellations that rule the country ever since have digged the nationalistic well from different standpoints, in an attempt to framing globalization and providing alternative narratives to it. Nostalgic sets were devised across the 2010s, culminating with an eventual return of the military.

Keywords: Brazil; Economy; Globalization; Nationalism; Politics.

Resumo

O artigo, através de um estudo de caso (o ressurgimento do nacionalismo na política brasileira), aborda transformações na política doméstica e relações exteriores do Brasil nos últimos 35 anos. Trata-se de uma análise qualitativa focada em revisão bibliográfica da produção referente aos temas supracitados. Após a crise de 2008 os efeitos colaterais da globalização foram atacados por populismos ressurgentes com uma veia nacionalista – com a eleição de Donald Trump servindo como símbolo. Nós propomos que – a despeito da súbita ascensão de Jair Bolsonaro em 2018 – o Brasil não se encaixa facilmente nessa imagem de turbulência global. O Nacionalismo é uma característica definidora da polis brasileira. Ele permaneceu como um recurso simbólico ao longo das primeiras décadas do século, ativado pela crise, anteriormente à eleição de Trump. A crise de 2008 interrompeu a ascensão do Brasil como um poder emergente globalizado. As constelações políticas que governaram o país desde então beberam no manancial nacionalista a partir de diferentes pontos de vista, numa tentativa de redefinir a globalização e prover narrativas alternativas. Construções nostálgicas marcaram a década de 2010, culminando com o eventual retorno das Forças Armadas.

Palavras chave: Brasil; Economia; Globalização; Nacionalismo; Política.

The positivist motto "Order, Progress, Love" – albeit used in a reduced version – had become the hegemonic conception of politics since the onset of the Brazilian republic, 130 years ago. It adorns the national flag until our days *("Ordem e Progresso"*). Ever since Marshal Deodoro da Fonseca presided over, succeeding governments – military as well as civilian ones – resorted to either Order or Progress, in an attempt to convey both. Civilian governments laid waste to the rule of law and become dictatorships under the imperative of "order". Dictatorships were left to rot by their lack of overall "progress", opening gates for brief spells of redemocratization.

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The "Old Republic" held presidential elections for 35 years. A midwife Republic had another 16 years. The current "New Republic" celebrated 34 in 2020. That amounts to less than a century of formal democracy under the rule of law. No much love lost.

Figure 1 - Brazilian republican flag



In its latest incarnation – as the "New Republic", born in 1985 – the Brazilian polity kept old major lines in place (GAMA, 2019a). Firstly, the imperative of "order" – a slow, gradual, safe transition to civilian rule after 21 years of overt military dictatorship. Afterwards, economic "progress" – amidst the "lost decade", that meant putting an end to hyperinflation, reducing the world' biggest external debt and sustained growth. Last but not least, "love" – a modicum of social justice after two authoritarian decades. That comprised civil and political rights restored, transitional justice for the victims of dictatorship, Human Rights protected (including empowerment of native peoples and minorities), some overdue redistribution in the land of the highest Gini score – and solidarity in international relations.

The division of labor between the major parties of the redemocratization meant each of them was in charge of a single task, hoping the best for the rest. PMDB – the major opposition party during dictatorship – was responsible for the first civilian government after the *years of lead*. Under its aegis, a new Constitution saw the light. However, attempts to abruptly revitalizing the economy failed spectacularly. At his nadir, José Sarney enjoyed approval rates of 8% and inflation reached 70% at a monthly basis. By then, national currency (changed compulsively) was a cause for ridicule. In the meantime, constitutional promises of a "citizens' nation" were left for future rulers to fulfill.

The first president elected under the 1988 Constitution – Fernando Collor de Mello – was not bound to be the savior of Brazilian economy. He came to power amidst a heterodox shock therapy wildly unpopular – turning an electoral phenomenon (the anti-Sarney) into a lame duck in a semester.

Confiscating the populations' savings for one year and a half proved the bottom line of this brief administration – followed by two years of deep recession, a first for Brazil since 1929. At the helm of a small party (PRN), Collor was a fragile figure in Legislative bargains. Eventually, his government was engulfed by media-touted corruption scandals. Congress could not care less, voting in favor or his impeachment 30 months after his arrival. By then, the population was relieved. No love lost.

Between the interim government of Itamar Franco (Collor's vice-president, a PMDB maverick) and next elected president (renowned sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso, another PMDB émigré, now running for social-democrats PSDB) Brazil experienced economic stabilization for the first time. The Real Plan put an end to hyperinflation and – for a while – elevated the purchasing power among the poorer strata. A foreign investment boom turned the country into bright emerging figure again. Under Cardoso "New Republic" reached a new accommodation between major parties PMDB, PFL and PSDB (leaders of the coalition). A host of constitutional reforms included the right of reelection. Amidst accusations of bribery, Cardoso duly obtained his in 1998 – both times prevailing over trade union icon Lula (Workers' Party – PT). His government was the first in which a new party (PSDB, born in 1988 alongside the Constitution) controlled simultaneously the Planalto Palace and the houses of Congress, as well as improved its representation in state governments by leaps and bounds (GAMA, 2019b). His administration attempted a state reform along liberal lines during the first years of economic boom, harshly contested in Congress and at the streets of major cities.

In 1968, Cardoso went to political exile in Chile, after being stripped from his right to teach in Brazil at the apex of dictatorship. The eight years of PSDB rule saw brave attempts to deal with the legacies of authoritarianism. There was an emphasis on rights, with the creation of a Special Secretary for Human Rights and a Defense ministry (ruled by civilians) instead of a military ministry for each force.

The Cardoso moment has its zenith in 1998 with reelection and its nadir not long after, in 1999, with a massive devaluation of the national currency Real amidst a liquidity crisis in emerging economies. Almost overnight the president become a massively unpopular figure, with standards of living falling abruptly and violence statistics skyrocketing. In 2002, Lula finally got a checkered flag for presidency.

Once in power, PT kept the main lines of economic stabilization and political transition, yet with a renewed emphasis on social justice. Lula launched a global campaign against hunger, followed by ambitious social policies ("Fome Zero", "Bolsa Família", incentives for housing and upper education among the poor) which proved massively popular as well as spurred a major redistribution of wealth in a still very unequal country. At the external front, if Brazil had (since Collor de Mello) pursued the profile

of an emerging economy aligned with G-7, a renowned collaborator, now it claimed the role of an emerging Global South power through Third World partnerships (especially in Latin America).

Differing from PSDB, PT still depended on other major parties, as it did not reach presidency at the helm of a broad coalition. The first Lula years were checkered ones, marked by a long-lasting political scandal in relations between Planalto and Congress (Mensalão) which almost provoked an impeachment process – and during which the Judiciary become a major political force for the first time since the Old Republic. Afterwards, Lula was reelected and PMDB – initially a cautious ally – become a major partner, which conferred some stability during another economic crisis in a partially globalized world – only that, at this time, it proved to be the deepest crisis since 1929.

In retrospect, the responses to the 2008 crisis are largely responsible for providing the contours of 2020's Brazil (GAMA, 2018).

Attempts to balance the Legislative liabilities that paved "Mensalão" accompanied by anti-cyclical economic policies on the crisis' aftermath saw Lula on a crossroads, extending his hands to both Pentecostal Evangelism and Brazilian big business – a puzzling move for PT, created out of trade unions and Catholic social movements. After one year of negative growth (the first since Collor) Brazil experienced 10%-plus GDP increases, amidst a new wave of popular consumerism associated with the rise of "new middle classes". At the international stage, Brazil was counted among the most robust emerging countries, members of the BRICS group demanding participation and efficiency at crippled international financial institutions. This was the background of Dilma Rousseff's election.

During the Dilma years, PMDB played a much more prominent role in the administration. It occupied the vice-presidency with Michel Temer, a former Congress speaker and a major articulator. PMDB also had a significant number of ministries (eventually supplanting PT). Dilma depended on "national champions" to foster the economy and on conservative groups (now members of her coalition) to approve increasingly contested policies. As economic growth gradually slid away, she was at odds with constituencies – which displayed their discontent in surprising fashion across 2013, as the world dealt with the fallout of movements such as the Arab Uprisings, "Occupy Wall St." and *Indignados*.

The 2014 election was a turning point. With a halted economy, it was the closest dispute since 1989. The outcomes were judicially contested by PSDB and runner-up Aécio Neves. Parliamentary winds shifted for opposition, a conservative representation posed future trouble for a reelected Rousseff.

The combination of Judiciary prominence, economic stagnation, a crumbling governing coalition and popular distress in the streets was the volatile cocktail at the eve of New Republic's third decade. Dilma attempted a U-turn in economic policies with a harsh neoliberal adjustment – which only triggered more popular discomfort and did her no favors with her coalition allies.

After two years of negative growth in Brazil, the PMDB-dominated Congress, in highly controversial impeachment process steered by a prominent Judiciary, finally ousted a wildly unpopular Rousseff. The scene was familiar in New Republic, 24 years after Collor – but the differences were also striking. Close allies sealed Dilma's fate. She was not accused of corruption. And interim president Temer was a political figure with a stature that Itamar Franco could not afford. In that he resembled Sarney.

The brief Temer government could not revitalize the Brazilian economy. Contested from the start and under cascades of accusations, Temer relied on the swift operation of the Legislative between 2016 and 2018. However, the major strands that opposed Rousseff and Lula were not speaking the same language. Spearheaded by Neves, PSDB pushed for constitutional and neoliberal reforms of state and economy. PMDB and PFL (now in charge of the House of Representatives and renamed, respectively, MDB and DEM) were much less enthusiastic about. Popular disenchantment materialized in anti-PT hysteria. The courts now played the major role in the Brazilian polis, under the sway of an unprecedented CarWash operation. At the external front, Temer reversed Global South alliances attempted by Lula and Dilma, resorting to traditional allies (Western Europe, US), favoring cautious approaches at international institutions.

"Progress" seemed elusive after the brief spell of BRICS, "national champions", "new middle classes" and global megaevents. Brazil was no longer (at) the wave of the future. "Love" laid engulfed in waves of political hate and disillusion past 2013 – with a multiplicity of agendas searching for focal points amidst accusations of corruption and betrayal. During the Temer administration, "Order and Progress" become the motto of government propaganda. Nevertheless, as "Progress" was sorely lacked, "Order" was conflated (once again) with a military return to the center of the polis.

Figure 2 - Michel Temer's official insignia



The Defense minister was now a General. Rio de Janeiro – an aspiring "global city" – was now under a military intervention (ironically, just after the end of Brazilian collaboration with the UN for "stabilizing" Haiti). After marginalizing Venezuela from MERCOSUR, Brazil strengthened military cooperation with Trump-led US across 2018. In October, an Army Captain was elected president.

So, the arrival of Jair Bolsonaro was only partially surprising. He did not spring, out of a sudden, from other galaxies to Planalto Palace. There were precedents in what was allowed during Temer years. And the aftermath of the 2008 crisis provided another bowl of ongoing processes, still unresolved.

Bolsonaro's administration comprises political groups that presided over Rousseff's impeachment as well as segments of the Brazilian society that Lula courted after "Mensalão" and 2008. A fragile amalgam with few focal points, the current Brazilian government is the outcome of disparate crises. Its working method depends on satisfying issue-area interests from divergent groups.

In 2020, the New Republic turned a third of a century under the "Order" thumb, "Love" and "Progress" subdued. After all, it remains an integral part of this Brazilian Republic – established by the military 130 years ago, spurred by the enthusiasm of a handful of civilians, removed from the majority of population.

After the 2008 crisis, the side-effects of globalization have been certified by resurgent populisms with a nationalistic bent – with Donald Trump's election providing a benchmark in this respect (GAMA, 2020a).

We propose that – in spite of Bolsonaro's sudden ascent in 2018 – Brazil do not readily fit into this picture of global turmoil. Nationalism is a constitutive feature of the Brazilian polis. It remained an untapped resource across the first decades of the new century, well ahead Trump's election. As the 2008 crisis curtailed Brazil's rise as a globalized emerging power, the political constellations that rule the country ever since have digged the nationalistic well from different standpoints, in an attempt to framing globalization and providing alternative narratives to it. Nostalgic sets were devised across the 2010s, culminating with an eventual return of the military.

In 2020, the Brazilian economy is diving down to the lowest echelons since 1929. The ruling presidential coalition fell apart during the coronavirus epidemic (GAMA, 2020b), with the country surpassing 3 million cases (tellingly, including the president). Even this said, it came as no surprise that Bolsonaro adopted as his motto "Lovely Fatherland Brazil" ("*Pátria Amada Brasil*"), extracted from the Brazilian anthem. Even though displaying no empathy towards those affected by epidemics (who claimed more than 100.000 lives in a semester), nationalistic mobilization remains a key political feature in the wastelands of 21st century Brazil.

Figure 3 - Jair Bolsonaro's official insignia



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