

Brazilian Universities under Attack

From the Biopolitical Pact to the Necropopulist Moment

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ABSTRACT Brazil has around half of Latin America's twenty-five best-ranked universities, and all of them are public. Most Brazilian public universities are also socially embedded, building knowledge in dialogue with communities, and are involved in defending human rights, social justice, and environmental sustainability. They are a fundamental part of the Brazilian biopolitical pact that has prevailed in recent decades. Brazil's new, openly authoritarian government has chosen this public university system as a central target, pursuing two courses of action: one a radical neoliberal agenda and the other an ideological war on the production of critical, social, and scientific knowledge. For this regime and its necropolitical bias, public universities are no longer necessary institutions. Nevertheless, despite all the attacks against them, universities have acted as important institutions in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic, defending life and human rights.

KEYWORDS Brazil, higher education, Bolsonaro, necropolitics, dedemocratization

Over the last two decades, public universities in Brazil have provided spaces for the cultivation of multiethnic diversity and a new radicalism. Under the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, or Workers' Party) government (2003–16), public universities became spaces of social and cultural innovation that challenged the discrimination through which historical injustice was rationalized in Brazil. Strong efforts to democratize access to universities changed previously white, urban, and elitist student bodies and curricula into more diverse and inclusive environments for learning and research. Such change and diversification could be observed in terms of class, income, gender, race, and the secondary education of students, thanks to an aggressive quota policy, the introduction of new learning and research topics and methodologies, and, above all, the new locations and regional connections of university campuses built in the hinterlands, in the Amazon, and on the peripheries of the metropolitan areas.¹ This contributed to a progressive cultural politics that expanded the moral contours of Brazilian society.

Broadly celebrated by the PT—specifically by the governments of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–10) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–16)—this cultural politics was integrated into a social pact that promised freedom to consume for the poor and freedom to accumulate for the rich. This was a *biopolitical pact*, “the tacit agreement, fundamental to modern political societies, whereby, in exchange for enhancing the economic capacity of the governed, government officials assume responsibility for keeping them alive.”² The pact sought to extend consumption, enabled by targeted state assistance (i.e., without fundamental challenges to neoliberal hegemony), and it was imagined as guaranteeing a humanitarian minimum for survival. This led to Lula’s enormous popularity, his rule as a populist leader identified with the right to life and to consume basic goods, with the end of hunger and absolute poverty, and with new opportunities for the poor, including access to higher education.

However, behind this picture of class conciliation presented by the PT government, old tendencies toward economic dismantling and neocolonial reversal persisted in Brazil. Initially, the acceleration of deindustrialization began in the 1980s, when the PT operationalized a neoextractivist model of development. It expanded Brazil’s “agricultural frontier,” offering lucrative contracts to private energy and construction firms and colluding in the violent displacement of vulnerable populations in the Amazon and elsewhere. Meanwhile, the long genocide of poor Black Brazilians in metropolitan peripheries continued unabated, with the militarized “pacification” of favelas causing thousands of civilian deaths.³ As Giorgio Agamben has argued, the biopolitical rationality that affirms a right to life can also make life more vulnerable;⁴ it can also give rise to a necropolitical regime, as described by Achille Mbembe.⁵

The biopolitical pact consolidated under PT rule reflected this ambiguity given the limited conditions for the defense of life under a neoliberal, predatory, and even neocolonial economic model that continued to act without restraint (and in fact was further entrenched). In the end, the pact proved to be more fragile than was previously imagined, and the mutation mentioned by Agamben was swept away by a series of events that culminated with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent disaster under Jair Bolsonaro’s rule.

In the face of the economic crisis that Dilma Rousseff was unable to reverse, local elites, police, and military forces (including militias), and the more conservative factions of the middle- and low-income classes (Pentecostal Evangelicals, the mass of unemployed people, and small entrepreneurs) decided to break the pact. Rousseff was overthrown in 2016, and reforms that cut public spending and imposed losses on workers were approved then presented as a solution to the crisis. The biopolitical pact has now been transformed under Bolsonaro into a new type of politics: a *necropolitical populism* that defines “hate as politics”⁶ and exudes the “extermination of the enemy.”⁷ This politics shares similarities with fascism and

Nazism but is anchored in our colonial history of genocide and long-lasting slavery, whose tendencies toward selective extermination and structural racism persist in postcolonial Brazil today.⁸

Bolsonaro's necropolitics has become increasingly evident in his (de)administration in the face of the pandemic, his discrediting of social distancing, the use of masks, vaccines, and any scientific evidence—and above all in his utter lack of empathy after hundreds of thousands of deaths. Bolsonaro is the incarnation, as perhaps Trump was in the United States, of the suicidal and genocidal drives of capitalism left to itself, inflated by neoliberal and neoconservative fundamentalism and paramilitary militias.

Sustained by a paroxysmal politics of annihilation, Bolsonaro has found in the COVID-19 pandemic an opportunity to hasten a final rupture of Brazil's previous, ambiguous biopolitical pact. This rupture implies an attempt to disappear universities, to eliminate them from the public sphere; it implies the transformation of higher education into a private consumer good and its disconnection from social and civic goods that might protect the right to life.

In this short essay, I briefly discuss the democratic advances represented by the multiethnic and multifaceted expansion of Brazilian public universities. I show what the break with the PT's nearly fifteen-year hegemonic rule implies for the expansion of public higher education and the defunding of universities and science under Bolsonaro, whose rule has meant devastation of the public university and science research system. To conclude, I address how universities have acted during the pandemic, despite all of the attacks against them, as some of the last structures in Brazil still defending life and human rights.

Changing Power and Knowledge through the Democratization of Public Universities

During the fourteen years of the four successive PT administrations in the twenty-first century, major new advances were envisioned and implemented in the public university system as a direct result of the pressure of progressive social movements. The number of enrollments per year in public universities more than tripled—from 109,000 to 393,000 new places per year—as a result of promotion by the Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais (REUNI, or Federal University Restructuring and Expansion Program), which expanded access like never before.⁹ Additionally, the number of full-time, tenure-track professors in public universities increased by 64 percent.

As a REUNI Program directive, 17 new universities and 126 new federal campuses were built in places that had no history of official public university presence, including the poor peripheries of large cities, semiarid and Amazonian regions, and less populated and less developed hinterlands. From a curricular point of view and at the level of political and pedagogical practices, universities became even

more socially embedded, building knowledge in dialogue with communities and defending human rights, social justice, and environmental sustainability. Important research has sought to map the impact of this expansion and its positive consequences for local development from economic, social, and cultural points of view.¹⁰ The expansion also led to increased numbers of qualifications for public service, fostered extension programs with vulnerable communities, and developed new science, technology, and innovation courses integrating national and global networks with local impacts.

Although Lula's government was unable to obtain approval for its university reform project, important institutional advances did occur under PT administrations. In 2004, the Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Superior (SINAES, or National Higher Education Evaluation System) used innovative metrics in three dimensions (assessing institutions, courses, and student development) to introduce new parameters of quality control and comparison among institutions. A Sistema de Seleção Unificada (SISU, or Unified Selection Process) was created in 2009, allowing for admission to any of the sixty-eight public federal universities using the Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (ENEM, or High School Quality Assessment Test). This greatly expanded opportunities for access and intranational student mobility. However, in certain regions, this new mobility ended up reducing local students' access to universities in their own states, with negative consequences, especially for the poorest. A constitutional amendment was approved, giving new status to the ten-year national education plan, and the creation of a national education system was approved in 2014. This anticipated that the expansion of public universities would continue, and an increase in public investment in education would increase from 5 to 10 percent of Brazil's gross domestic product in ten years.

Finally, affirmative action policies were created, markedly changing the undergraduate profile of public universities, previously made up almost exclusively of white students from wealthier classes.¹¹ Several universities initiated quota policies before the innovative Quota Law of 2012, which established isonomic criteria for all federal universities around the country, guaranteeing half of their enrollments would be of incoming students from public high schools and including ethnic and income-based subcriteria based on the population profiles of each state. More recently, a complementary law declared the inclusion of peoples living with disabilities within the quota system.

Today, the student population in Brazil's public universities has come closer to reflecting Brazilian society, in terms of income, class, gender, and race. The data collected by the Fórum Nacional de Pró-Reitores de Assuntos Comunitários e Estudantis (FONAPRACE, or National Forum of Deans of Community and Student Affairs) are impressive.¹² According to this data, within a fifteen-year period

(2003–18), the number of undergraduate students who came from lower or lower-middle income families (less than US\$300 per capita per month) grew from 42 to 70 percent; the share of students who came from public high schools grew from 36 to 60 percent; and the number of students of color (those who self-identify as of African or Indigenous descent) increased from 36 to 53 percent. The total number of Black students grew by a factor of 5.3, while the number of *pardo* (mestizo) students increased by 3.5 in the same period. In terms of gender identity and sexual orientation, in 2018, 48 percent of students identified as cis women, 40 percent as cis men, and 16.4 percent as LGBTQI+.

Today, Brazil has one of the largest public and completely tuition-free (for residents and foreigners) university systems in the world; in 2018 there were 296 public higher education institutions (federal, state, and municipal) and 2.35 million students. Brazil's public higher education system accounts for three-fifths of postgraduate courses and 95 percent of the research done in the country. Brazil ranks eleventh in global academic research production and, of the first fifteen countries, had the fifth-highest average research growth rate between 2008 and 2018.¹³ According to Times Higher Education Ranking for Latin America in 2019, of Latin America's twenty-five best universities, fourteen were Brazilian, and almost all were public.¹⁴

In addition to rankings—which demonstrate that Brazil is an important player in higher education and research, especially within the Global South in general and Latin America specifically—the most important fact is that the qualitative and democratic turnaround that occurred in the public university system did not imply the loss of its standards of quality. This turn has made it possible, for the first time in history, for universities to train a generation of intellectual and scientific leaders, in diverse places and fields of knowledge, who do not come strictly from the traditionally dominant classes.

In an assessment of the benefits of Brazil's public universities and the mixing of popular classes, Nilce Monfredini concludes that, although universities continue to contribute to the expanded reproduction of capital, their democratization “now involves problems that arise in the effort to decolonize and rethink the production of knowledge, incorporating various social actors, in different approaches, assuming the joint production of knowledge.”¹⁵ In her words, the deep connection with working-class and multiethnic groups is “inducing the (re)creation of the university itself.”¹⁶ The Brazilian university system (especially the public university system) has become one of the backbones of the Brazilian biopolitical pact, allowing for social mobility, more democratic access to knowledge, and the emergence of new leaders. As a direct result, Brazil's current far-right government has chosen public universities as one of its main targets of attack.

The Necropopulist Moment in Brazil: Universities under Attack

The unraveling of the PT government, marked by Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 and Lula's arrest in 2018,¹⁷ was due to several factors—outside the scope of this paper but including a loss of political support, corruption, persecution by the media, selective enforcement by the justice system, high unemployment rates, and economic recession. In 2016, shortly after Rousseff's impeachment, a constitutional amendment was approved, blocking the increase in public spending in real terms for twenty years; this was supposedly done with the goal of adjusting public spending, but it resulted in greater impacts on public policies and allowed for the dismantling of the Brazilian biopolitical pact. This dismantling has resulted in an increase in poverty and a lack of social assistance, as well as the destruction of entire public service systems, including higher education.

In five years (2016–21), the public budget for funding the maintenance of sixty-eight federal universities and forty-one federal technological institutes (staff expenditure excluded) has decreased by 32 percent. In the same five-year period, there has been a 48 percent decrease in the provision of federal resources for science, research, and postgraduate studies.¹⁸ Cuts in the federal universities' budgets started during Rousseff's second term, and these were further deepened with Michel Temer's then-new constitutional ceiling for public expenses. The situation continues to worsen with the new president, and the impact of these reductions has been destructive for the entire system.

In 2018, Bolsonaro's election represented the consolidation of a new power bloc with an explosive combination of radical neoliberalism (including extractive predation), racist and anti-human rights positions, weaponry and militarism (from the military and police to the criminal militias), and Pentecostal Evangelical fundamentalism, all coordinated in a frontal attack against democratic guarantees.¹⁹ With the advance of the pandemic and hundreds of thousands of deaths in Brazil, Bolsonaro's reactionary populism became a necropopulism—the antithesis of the biopolitical pact of the last decades in Brazil and of Lula's social-liberal populism.

The Bolsonaro government's overall agenda, including its relation to higher education, exemplifies Wendy Brown's argument in *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*; that is, a convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism has resulted in an "antidemocratic citizenry" or "forces of dedemocratization."²⁰ Brown's reference, however, is mainly to the recent alliance of American evangelicals with Donald Trump in reaction to Barack Obama's pluralist and globalist progressivism. Bolsonaro's neoliberal agenda—inspired by authoritarian agendas including Pinochet's in Chile—implies a major reduction of the state's budget and personnel cuts to public universities, inexorably pushing for internal privatization, intrasystem predation, and even destruction, as was seen decades ago with the public elementary education system. This was also the import of the 2017 report presented by the World Bank to

Brazil, titled *A Fair Adjustment*, which strongly recommended tuition fees for Brazilian public universities.²¹ In 2020, the education minister, Abraham Weintraub, presented to Congress a new bill for federal universities (called *Future-se*), which attacked public universities' autonomy and proposed a private, entrepreneurial mentality: selling research and services to the private sector, creating public-private funds for real estate and research, issuing securities in the investment market, ending the tenure track, and allowing the hiring of new professors by foundations and private companies through precarious and temporary contracts.²² All of these measures recall the privatizing and commodifying turn in US public universities since the late 1970s, a turn whose disastrous consequences are well known. They include what happened to its main follower in Latin America, Chile.²³

The neoconservative "ideological agenda," which seems to be an irrationalist, fundamentalist, and antiscience stance, is part of a much more complex cultural and political turn. The Bolsonaro government is also engaged in what James Hunter calls a "culture war" against the influence of progressive, multicultural, and cosmopolitan thinking.²⁴ In the past two decades, public universities—with the increasingly popular, plural, and multiethnic character of their student body—have become one of the main sites of intellectual, cultural, and political progressivism.

For this reason, they have also become one of the main targets of attack in the cultural warfare waged by the neoconservatives, geared strongly toward the humanities and the legacy of educator, scholar, and intellectual, Paulo Freire, in addition to what they more generally identify as "cultural Marxism."²⁵ Vulgar and obscure conspiracy theories from the past are revived to implicate "cultural Marxists" in the production of threats that are supposedly ever more pervasive and imminent.

For the neoconservatives, their opponents in the cultural battle pose a threat to the white, Christian, and patriarchal family, and they imagine that public universities are full of such enemies. This is part of a broader attack on science itself, especially on scientific evidence that contradicts increasingly environmentally predatory policies and actions, and on the rights of Indigenous populations, minorities, and human rights, which the government carries out itself or permits. More recently, the attacks on science are associated with the government's criminal stance in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bolsonaro has, whenever possible, appointed university presidents (or rectors) who are not elected by their respective university councils (Brazil uses a triple list system, allowing the president of the Republic to nominate one of the three names on the list) in favor of right-wing candidates (who generally place third on the lists), of whom twenty-one have already been appointed. Recognizing this president's harmful actions against the constitutional autonomy and democratic governance

of universities, the Supreme Court tried to impose limits and regulations, in a case that is still pending. The federal government has also significantly increased surveillance of public sector workers, from public officials to academics. There are already loopholes in Brazilian antiterror law that can be used to justify political repression as a preventive measure. University teachers (especially in the humanities) have become victims of political persecution, outsourced to new right-wing activist groups, or disguised as investigations into criminal misconduct.²⁶

For both of these agendas, the neoliberal and the neoconservative, public universities no longer make sense as institutions in an increasingly internationally subordinate country that is economically dependent, producing only commodities, violence, ignorance, fear, and social disintegration. Nowadays, Brazilian elites send their children to study abroad, especially to the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe, and they no longer need a high-quality national public university system.²⁷ In other words, the economic elites will form a generation of their successors completely dissociated from any further commitment to Brazilian society, democracy, and institutions.

Responding to the Pandemic, Resisting Annihilation

While the pandemic has produced political challenges for his government, Bolsonaro has also used it to intensify the assault on public universities and deepen his necropopulism. In August 2020, as Brazil's official death toll surpassed one hundred thousand, the government informed the presidents of federal universities that, in 2021, there would be a further cut of 18.2 percent in their unrestricted budgets, which are used to cover running costs.²⁸ As the largest year-on-year reduction in government spending on federal universities, this could force Brazil's higher education system to collapse.

That public universities have responded decisively to the pandemic shows that they have nonetheless demonstrated a capacity to resist. They have increased the provision of open and extracurricular courses, reaching online beyond the academic community, organizing debates, and establishing solidarity networks that provide health care, including psychological support. The continuation of many university activities has contributed to the development of an open-university model.

Additionally, public universities have played an important role in disseminating scientifically grounded information on the epidemiology of the coronavirus. Within three months of the virus reaching Brazil, federal universities launched twelve hundred research projects related to COVID-19, focused on prevention, diagnosis, and treatment, on hospital management, and on the pandemic's implications for education, work, and income.²⁹ Brazil's public universities are also involved in the development of potential vaccines, many in partnership with scientific communities abroad. Public university laboratories have been adapted to increase the production

of ventilators, personal protective equipment, and basic medications. And, for the first time, all of the country's fifty-one public university hospitals (the backbone of the public health system) have come together to establish a collective procurement. Despite chronic underinvestment, Brazil's Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS, or Unified Health System), established after redemocratization in the 1980s, has held up relatively well during the pandemic. Mutual aid networks have emerged on the peripheries of cities, as communities have mobilized to protect the most vulnerable.

There is a general perception that the period of disinformation, manipulation, and genocidal politics needs to end and that society depends on knowledge and research—including knowledge and research used in defense of the right to life. The whole world is discussing what the postpandemic reality will be. Universities will likely play an important role in redefining principles and policies in defense of everyone's "right to be alive." In Brazil—as in other countries haunted by authoritarian pasts, entrenched in neoliberalism, and faced with fundamentalism—the challenges will be immense. Public universities have demonstrated vitality and institutional capacity at this moment of crisis while maintaining the biopolitical capacity to preserve life. This should encourage us to consider how universities and the scientific community can act in favor of science, diversity, tolerance, cooperation, and social and environmental justice.

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Notes

1. For a broader assessment of the expansion and democratization of higher education in Brazil and the turnaround under Bolsonaro, see Arantes, "Higher Education in Dark Times." The present article partially summarizes some of the arguments elaborated in the longer text mentioned above.
2. The expression is used by Rodrigo Nunes in "Necropolítica."
3. The balance of the PT period is controversial. One of the most complete and up-to-date is offered in the book edited by Santos, Perruso, and Oliveira, *O Pânico como política*.
4. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 71–72.
5. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.
6. Critical literature on the Bolsonaro government is still largely in production, and events can bring about new configurations. I highlight the book edited by Esther Solano before Bolsonaro's election, *O ódio*.

7. The cultural war initiated by the new Brazilian right and by the Bolsonaro government presupposes not a political adversary but “an internal enemy to be harassed and, at the limit, eliminated.” Most often, this is an “invented enemy.” See Castro Rocha, *Guerra cultural*.
8. This is a central topic in studies of Brazil’s national formation and its contradictions—Brazil’s place in the combined and uneven development of capitalism, in a subaltern and dependent position. Florestan Fernandes argues that class struggle in Brazil takes the form of “extermination,” which he compares to ethnic conflicts in other parts of the world. See Fernandes, *Capitalismo dependente*.
9. The data above and most of the data below were obtained from the annual Higher Education Census in Brazil by INEP, *Censo da educação superior 2018*. I adopted the 2018 numbers as these came from the last available census—further censuses have been suspended by the Bolsonaro government.
10. Several sector and case studies of higher expansion in Brazil have been carried out, but unfortunately no more global critical assessment exists. Among the existing studies, I highlight two studies of the economic impacts on local and regional development following the implementation of new public campuses: Vinhais, “Estudo”; Niquito, Ribeiro, and Portugal, “Impacto.”
11. Joana Passos carried out an excellent study of the advances and challenges arising from affirmative action and the change in the racial profile of university students in Brazil. See Passos, “Relações raciais.”
12. The data presented in this paragraph are from FONAPRACE’s survey in 2019, “5ª pesquisa do perfil socioeconômico.”
13. This data was drawn from Clarivate Analytics, *Research in Brazil*.
14. THE World University Rankings, “Latin America University Rankings 2019.”
15. Monfredini, “A universidade,” 298.
16. Monfredini, “A universidade,” 299.
17. In March 2021, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Lula’s appeal and overturned all previous convictions.
18. Data collected by the author from Brazilian National Treasury, “Tesouro Direto.”
19. Marcos Nobre argues in his 2020 book *Ponto-final* that the decisive feature of the Bolsonaro government is the policy of war (or politics as war), in which a political opponent becomes an enemy to be exterminated. This authoritarian crusade aims at nothing less than the destruction of democracy—which is even more evident in the genocide conducted by Bolsonaro during the COVID-19 pandemic.
20. This double front in the new right is addressed by Brown in *In the Ruins*, esp. chap. 3.
21. World Bank, *A Fair Adjustment*, 15.
22. Roberto Leher was rector (president) of the largest and most important Brazilian federal public university (Universidade Federal de Rio de Janeiro) and edited a book consolidating the main criticisms of the *Future-se* project. See Leher et al., *Future-se*.
23. Christopher Newfield takes an X-ray of transformations in US public universities in his 2016 book *The Great Mistake*, which considers changes ranging from the student debt crisis to the loss of universities’ public value. In Latin America, Chile vigorously followed this privatizing model. Since 2006, student movements have been protagonists in struggles against the rising cost of living and the neoliberal model, culminating in the famous demonstration of Chilean high school students that became known as the Revolt of the Penguins, due to the students’ black-and-white uniforms. In 2011, university students led

protests with occupations of universities and street protests in defense of “tuition-free education” (*gratuidade*). In 2018, as a result of popular pressure, the Chilean government passed a law that fosters progressive tuition-free education in public and even private universities, starting at a 60 percent subsidy for students with lower incomes.

24. Hunter, *Culture Wars*.
25. The new Brazilian right sees the gelatinous concept of cultural Marxism (which includes Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School, and Paulo Freire and much of Brazilian cultural production, especially in music, theater, and cinema) as the “beast of left hegemony” that must be fought. Castro Rocha reconstitutes the debate in *Guerra cultural*.
26. See Valente, “Ação sigilosa.”
27. In 2018 alone, 50,400 Brazilians undertook an undergraduate course abroad, an increase of almost 40 percent compared to 2017 (Martins and Correa, “O sonho dos brasileiros”).
28. Amaral, “MEC deve cortar.” The cut for 2021 is even greater than that, leading to a 21 percent loss relative to the discretionary budget of 2020.
29. According to data released by the National Association of Federal Higher Education Institutions Leaders (ANDIFES). For a summary of the activities of Brazil’s federal universities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, see Canal Andifes, “I Congresso Andifes.”

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