

Jean Tible

Movements and Countermovements in Contemporary Brazil: Repression, Confrontation, and the Fight for Land

For José Cláudio Souza Alves

How can the rise and current strength of the far right in Brazil be understood? (Amaral 2023). In what follows, we will assess the route of recent years—from the Lula era through June 2013—recognizing this reemergence as a countermovement in a historical context.

Brazil Begins Here

A sign in Clevelândia in the far north, says, “Brazil begins here.” Lo and behold, it’s a good image of a long historical trend if we think about the political prison in Oiapoque, a concentration camp where militant activists (mainly anarcho-syndicalists from Rio and São Paulo) were taken to die in the turbulent first decades of the last century. It’s a continuous trajectory. After several attempts involving sugar mill owners, the Church, *bandeirantes* (colonial explorer), mercenaries, the Portuguese, and the Dutch in the seventeenth century, Palmares was crushed. At the end of the nineteenth century in Belo Monte, the cursed, diabolical, and irrational settlement mobilized half the army, five generals, and the Minister of War in the newly proclaimed Republic. A founding massacre. Canudos was torched and twenty-five thousand perished in the second largest city in Bahia. Many were beheaded in the name of “civilization” and others destroyed by the technological cutting

edge of cannons manufactured by Krupp (a company that will later support Nazism). This military expedition “was not a campaign, it was a slaughterhouse. It was not a rigid legal measure; it was revenge” (Barros, Prieto, and Marinho 2000; Cunha [1901] 2000: 478).

Does the famous statement about social issues as a police issue, which is attributed to a Washington Luís (president of Brazil during that initial oligarchic-republican period) still apply? It certainly does in the case of the Navy’s ongoing refusal to recognize the bravery of Black admiral João Cândido and in the disappearances of the activists Honestino Guimarães (who was kidnapped in a major operation at the University of Brasília at the beginning of the dictatorship) and Chico Mendes during the transition back to democracy. It applies in the so-called democratic period of the 1990s, in the massacres of Carandiru (the Brazilian prison’s most violent action), the Candelária church’s children, in the slaughter of twenty-one people in Vigário Geral, and of the nineteen landless people in Eldorado do Carajás. It applies to the explosion of homicides committed by the police in the big cities from the end of the 1970s, conceived by the “corporate-military dictatorship of 1964,” involving death squads formed within the police *dispositif*, financed by economic groups, and supported by politicians (Alves 2020: 12–13). Escaping public scrutiny, the military police switched from guerilla warfare to fighting common crime, while maintaining their repressive techniques, such as staging shootings to justify murders—now against “bandits” and “suspects” (that is, “normally young, Black, poor, and living on the outskirts”) (Manso 2016: 75–76; Coimbra 2021). A reality of the Brazilian State emerges from this long and tragic plot.

Rio Scenes

Scene 1

During the national demonstrations in 2013, one million people protested on June 20 in downtown Rio. Four days later, a demonstration took place to reduce bus fares in Bonsucesso. A small group assaults some demonstrators on the road and goes into the Complexo do Maré (a set of favelas in the northern region of Rio). The Riot Police, which was following the march, goes after it and calls the Special Police Operations Battalion (*Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais*). Upon entering the Nova Holanda favela at 8 p.m., the commander is shot and dies immediately. An hour later, a police operation armed with military gear begins. Yet another “revenge.” Throughout that night of terror, houses in the region’s favelas are invaded, dozens of

residents are injured, and nine are killed. The crime scenes were all tampered with, shell casings and bodies collected before the forensics arrived (Brum 2013, Dieguez 2013).

Scene 2

November 28, 2015, Saturday night: a group of six childhood friends go to a show in Parque Madureira and then take a car and a motorcycle to find a snack bar. They are celebrating the first paycheck one of them got as a supermarket assistant. On their way, four police officers are waiting for drug dealers who have stolen a shipment from a company where another police officer was doing a private security gig. They unload rifles and revolvers from a car that is passing by. They don't ask any questions. And despite the young people's gestures, they shoot. Wilton, Wesley, Cleiton, Carlos Eduardo, and Roberto die instantly. The one on the motorcycle manages to escape by accelerating and only being shot in the bumper. One hundred eleven shots: sixty-three hit the car and forty the group of childhood friends. The police officers reportedly smiled after the shooting (Rojas 2016, Mazzei 2015, Bovo 2018).

Scene 3

On Sunday, April 7, 2019, a couple and their families are on their way to a baby shower and pass through a military zone in the Guadalupe neighborhood. Musician Evaldo Rosa dos Santos is shot nine times. The car is hit by sixty-two bullets out of a total of 257 shots fired by a group of nine soldiers. The trash collector Luciano Macedo tries to help them and is shot three times (he will die a few days later in the hospital). The car could have been mistaken for another, one used by suspected criminals. Evaldo's widow, nurse Luciana Oliveira, reported that the perpetrators mocked her when she called them murderers (Martinelli 2019 and Sabóia 2019).

In these scenes, the authorities express reactions ranging from shy to scandalized, and the refusal to hold perpetrators responsible predominates. Such events, which are not anomalous, would be perceived as exaggerated if they were characterized in a work of fiction. What to think and feel about a country whose government assassinates its citizens in this way? What to think and feel about a country in which the bare minimum of the so-called "social contract" is violated in this way, and its officers open fire on civilians from a helicopter or armored vehicles as a "normal," "correct," or even celebrated practice? (Cícero 2019). The above episodes set the scene of a colonial

war: the police and armed forces invade territories and oppress their populations, which results in resonances with the occupations in Iraq, Syria, Libya, or Palestine. This is not new, since Brazil is founded on genocide and slavery, and has never truly faced this ethical abyss (Silva 2019).

“I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it,” Saidiya Hartman (2021: 133) suggests. Thinking about this in the Brazilian context (but could it be American?) Florestan Fernandes links democracy to racial equality. This is why we are still fighting for it, and Black movements are pioneers in calling “into question the democratic foundations of the existing order” (Fernandes [1989] 2017: 41, 52, and 63). As Oswald de Andrade said, unlike in the US, here in Brazil it was the slave-owning South that won the (undeclared) civil war; therefore, Fernandes advocates for a second abolition. After their defeat in the US Civil War, thousands of confederates came to seek refuge in Brazil, where that peculiar institution was more respected. Their descendants still organize an annual confederate party in a town in the São Paulo state countryside, but they are not racist, nor do they defend slavery—just the State. These societies that repress their slave-owning past thus try to forget it (Andrade 1991, Brasher 2019).

The Lula Years and a Tragic Disagreement

How to situate the Lula years in this context? The transformations in Brazil as well as in its South American neighbors during the Lula years were preceded (and initiated) by irruptions: one of the first popular revolts against neoliberal austerity in Venezuela (the Caracazo in 1989), the water and gas wars in Bolivia in the early 2000s, the Indigenous uprisings in Ecuador, the Argentine *o que se vayan todos* in 2001, and the “new characters that appeared on the scene” (Sader 1988) in Brazil in the late 1970s and early 1980s (which took off in the Constituent Assembly in the late 1980s and resulted in the recognition of Indigenous and *quilombola* [maroon communities composed of escaped enslaved people and other fugitives of the colonial social order] lands, in addition to the public health system).

Its achievements (combating social and ethnic-racial inequalities, the emergence of new subjects, and the attempt to form a regional bloc) were only possible due to these mobilizations. In the early years of the twenty-first century, South America was one of the most fruitful political laboratories on the planet, and the challenges it faced are directly related to its inability to deepen these emerging changes. A knot in South American progressivism becomes evident in four sites in different countries: Belo Monte-Tipnis-

Yasuní-Vaca Muerta. In these four crucial political decisions, governments gave up on creating alternative paths to reaffirm the usual route, though they remained slightly left leaning. The construction of the hydroelectric plant in Brazil, the opening of a road through a park in Bolivia, the initiation of oil exploration in a reserve in Ecuador, and shale gas extraction in southern Argentina all converge in a monocultural direction, resulting in significant loss for the potential transformation of collective lives.

In the Brazilian context, the 2013 protests added an unusual new layer. A political earthquake shook the country's territory in June of that year. Millions of people—transcending divisions, sectors, and areas—took to the streets without any centralized coordination. An unprecedented event shook and changed the country. The preceding decade was marked by the rise of tens of millions (Albuquerque 2012) with disputes unfolding in the streets not just in institutions, making Brazilian politics an exception to the South American situation. In addition to connecting the June Protests with the global wave of revolts, parallels emerge with 1968 (Mexico City, Dakar, Berkeley, Nanterre, Córdoba, Tokyo, Rio, and São Paulo) given the role of new university students: in Brazil, their numbers exploded in the preceding years, serving as a catalyst for uprising—new existential possibilities for these young workers facing a wall of adversities.

In this “rebellion of the governed against the rulers” (Nunes 2022, 167), we can observe demands that clearly emerge from grassroots organizing: against the bus company mafia (poor services and high prices, lacking transparency in costs and profits), against police violence, and for significant improvements in public education and health care. These agendas gain strength after the massive demonstrations. However, they had been overlooked by the Workers' Party (PT) government, and this applies to issues that are deeply important to Black, Indigenous, and transfeminist movements, often ignored by society as a whole and to a great extent by the left—issues like the war on drugs and on certain individuals and communities. In 2013, writes Camila Jourdan, “the targets of popular revolt were the agents of their daily oppression: buses, bank branches, Government Palaces, Legislative Assemblies, vehicles of the manipulative media monopoly, police cars” (Jourdan 2018: 111). Ongoing and uninterrupted revolts gain more visibility; just as public transportation fare hikes were rolled back in over a hundred cities, it became possible to demand and achieve changes in other domains.

As a broad reaction comes to the fore, the divergence between the left in power and the protests becomes acute. Mechanisms are refined, and the executive, legislative, and judicial powers converge and collaborate on a coer-

cive state agenda. New, more sophisticated and varied weapons, tactics (such as kettling), filming and surveillance, infiltration (as in the Balta Nunes case with the Army), and federal coordination are implemented (“5 anos de Junho de 2013” 2018). These actions underscore coordinated efforts to restrict the fundamental right to protest. The federal government didn’t slow down this process; on the contrary, it actively participated, ignoring criticisms. Failing to halt this machine was a colossal mistake. Brazil ranks high in data on activist executions (alongside Mexico, Colombia, and the Philippines), reflecting a certain public-private policy of targeted assassinations (especially regarding land issues) of key figures, who were fighting for a country (and a planet) with dignity for everyone. Dismantling this repressive apparatus should be a fundamental task for any government seeking transformation.

What would have happened if the PT to come had taken seriously the banner raised by the Unified Black Movement (MNU) on the steps of the Municipal Theater? This was a public act in protest of racism during the dictatorship, which was prompted by the death of Robson Silveira da Luz on July 7, 1978, in São Paulo; the banner read “every prisoner is a political prisoner”? (Brauns, Santos, and de Oliveira 2020, 102). Despite the movement’s demands and pressure, addressing the extermination of young Black individuals was never deemed urgent. Far from countering it, Lula’s Brazil maintained the trend of mass incarceration and “the great continuity that permeates the meaning of our legal-penal system” (Batista 2016, 8). The 2006 Drug Law aimed to reduce penalties for users (and increase them for traffickers) but without specifying the quantity of each drug or differentiating one drug from the other, the Law left that decision to the discretion of the delegate or judge in a country structured by racism. The result? An explosion in the number of incarcerated individuals. At some point, we will need to establish truth commissions for the democratic period, as proposed by groups like the Mothers of Acari and the Mothers of May. This security-focused momentum tragically turned against the party itself and its primary leader: the ongoing quest for exceptional justice, which was constantly being manifested, imprisoned Lula (only to be revoked, which allowed him to return in a new election in 2022).

The Far Right Reemerges

In the background, once the immediate storm passed, the world of the Workers’ Party just continued, forgetting the riot demands. The consequences were severe for the movement. The PT proved incapable of shedding its state-centric perspective and building up its achievements, even when the streets pointed

in that direction and shifted the balance in power. Furthermore, the PT might have short-circuited by promoting new subjectivities without delving deeper, leaving an opening for the reactionary consequences. On the other side, the autonomous left, which encompassed dozens of organizations and sensibilities, unfortunately also failed to seize the opportunities of June 2013. One of its expressions, the Free Fare Movement (MPL), set Brazil on fire, raising a fundamental issue for the working class, and contributing to the emergence of a new radical political imagination. However, it failed to connect the struggle against transportation fares with the other barriers that plague society. In some way, the left was taken by surprise, and these missed openings are catastrophic, creating space for the extreme right (let's recall Walter Benjamin talking about fascism as the result of a failed revolution) (Benjamin [1940] 1987). As institutional politics fail to reckon with the events of 2013, its crisis intensifies, leading us toward a sinister scenario. June, with its challenge for representatives, inaugurated a new political cycle, and the left (more aligned with the diverse messages arising from the streets) failed to capitalize on these new ruptures: the strategy of disruption didn't achieve the tactical virtue of organization (Hardt and Negri 2017).

The year 2013 challenges the relentless war apparatus. The disappearance and murder of Amarildo Dias de Souza, a construction worker and Rocinha favela resident, has a strong public impact. Indigenous struggles signal rebellion, especially in the battle against the Belo Monte hydroelectric plant. The usual repression is vehemently contested at this moment. The murder of Marielle Franco, during the military intervention in Rio on March 14, 2018, can be seen as an attempt to close what had opened, taking the life of an embodied symbol of the new, emerging subjectivities. A few months later, and five years after the explosion, a candidate who celebrates this death machinery is elected in a process rife with illegalities (the 2016 coup, Lula's imprisonment); the candidate presents himself demagogically, as disconnected from a politically tumultuous system. By refusing to address our colonial wounds more forcefully (that is, the genocide of young Black individuals, the ethnocide of Indigenous peoples, and other immoral inequalities), these lingering issues of justice that have had impacts across generations since the inception of what we call Brazil turn against the ongoing political-creative process that was underway.

We never settled the scores with these misfortunes, and the most violent regions of an already highly violent country gain an even more crucial role, pointing toward the nationalization of their situations: Baixada Fluminense and western Rio with their militias, Pará and the Amazon on fire, and Mato Grosso do Sul and the unceasing killings. With less than three million

inhabitants, this state had two ministers at the start of Bolsonaro's presidency, both of whom were linked to anti-Indigenous positions, forming a dreadful blend with the blatant influence of the military and large landowners. A "death agenda" is the common thread in the different actions and initiatives of the Bolsonaro government on an almost endless list: cutting solidarity policies, the complete deregulation of pesticides, dismantling environmental policies and a consequential surge in deforestation, opposing Indigenous land demarcation, expanding gun ownership and possession, increasing punitive measures in a country already immersed in mass incarceration. All of this has been compounded by the genocidal mismanagement of the pandemic (with seven hundred thousand official deaths).

Over the past years, a fabric of lives, those modes of existing and living in the streets, alleyways, and villages, has emerged as the most immediate outcome of struggles against the dictatorship, democratization achievements, and openings in the 2000s. There have been countless creations constituting the unique eruption of new subjectivities—Black, LGBTQIAPN+, working class, peripheral, feminist, Indigenous, peasant. The fascist response can be understood as a countermovement triggered by the fear of the exuberant vitality of rebellious bodies. Hence the identitarian reactions (white, male, heteronormative) that flourish and the constant attacks on the main spheres of operation (culture and education) of these emergent forces, along with hate speech directed against individuals and collectives who subsist outside the norm.

Land, Land, Land

In March 2019, Jair Bolsonaro visits the USA, and in a brief speech at a dinner at the Brazilian ambassador's residence, declares his intention to liberate the country from the left: "Brazil is not an open field where we intend to build things for our people. We have to deconstruct many things, undo many things, before we start to build" (*Valor Econômico* 2019). Dismantlement, destruction, demolishing the social achievements of the last decades—from the 1988 Constitution to more democratic governments and protests: too many rights for too many people, the ruling elite decrees. This echoes Samuel Huntington's reading of the 1960s: American society became ungovernable due to an excess of demands from various actors, which impacted public finances and authorities who were struggling to meet expectations. A sensible action would be to rein in these excesses of democracy (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki. 1975).

“It’s possible to say that all the most notable moments in Brazilian society’s history are influenced by the agrarian issue,” Octavio Ianni states in considering transitions from “Monarchy to Republic, from oligarchic to populist state, from populist to military state,” as well as “during the military dictatorship crisis” (Ianni [1984] 2004, 7). The perspective of the extreme right is decisively linked to this issue. The then-vice president (and now senator) Hamilton Mourão glorifies Portuguese colonization, portraying the *bandeirantes* and the “sugar lords” of the slave trade as entrepreneurs shaping a Brazilian “manifest destiny.” The privatization of lands stolen from the inhabitants of this territory—which marks the beginning of Brazil—is seen as the “most advanced technology of the time” (Mourao 2019). In these conceptions, there’s a nostalgia for a patriarchal colonial past. In this seventeenth-century context, “while sugar lords built churches and protected the people, virile ‘bandeirantes’ led mixed-race militias on expeditions through the hinterlands to capture Indigenous people and seek natural wealth, extracting as much as possible from the abundant nature” (Lynch 2020: n.p.). This “cult of death and violence” and its dystopian “golden age” resonates with American Confederates and the *bandeirante*-militia relationship. This is Bolsonaro’s project, which is deeply tied to the country’s history—he is a “bourgeois gunslinger” (Lynch 2020) president. His goal? To complete the conquest, with a final offensive against Indigenous peoples, hence his obsession (and the military’s in general) with the Amazon.

Over the past decades, agribusiness has consolidated itself as a dynamic sector of the economy and a significant exporter. Despite support from the PT governments (through credits, tax exemptions, and more), the votes from regions where this sector is strong have increasingly shifted to its opposition. While Lula won almost all of Brazil in 2002, in 2006 he lost in Goiás and a few other states where this industry has a strong presence. This trend has not only continued but also grew stronger in the following four elections (2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022). Furthermore, a certain type of agribusiness subjectivity has gained strength, aligning itself with a violent stance against Indigenous peoples, *quilombolas*, and farmers—the age-old land issue, which involves a significant faction of lawmakers and politicians (Castilho 2012). Drawing on Cara Daggett’s thinking, one could talk about agromasculinity, blending economic models and authoritarian desires (Daggett 2018).

During his presidency, especially in challenging times, Bolsonaro frequently appealed to the mobilization of his bases and supporters, paradoxically more so than recent left-wing governments that might have been expected to adopt a more confrontational approach. The destruction of the

seats of the three powers in Brasília on January 8, 2023, is, for now, the pinnacle of a process that questions the minimal conventions for representative democracy. This escalation involved numerous actions following the electoral defeat (blocking roads, sabotaging power lines, attempted bombings at airports, and an attempted invasion of the Federal Police headquarters in the capital), often with the guaranteed complicity of security forces (the military and the police), and according to initial investigations, it was financed by agribusiness entrepreneurs.

The history of Brazil is the history of the struggle for land: from Indigenous peoples against invaders to the *quilombolas* fleeing and arming themselves to peasant leagues and landless movements, including the long lineage (Palmares-Canudos-Cabanagem-Balaiada-Contestado, and many more) of multiplicities-territories against landowners and large landholders. In opposition to the socio-environmental devastation and agribusiness's concentration of wealth, the uprising of the land's people even inspires a shift in cities. This is a life path, of healthy food for all, and a bioeconomy of the commons within the vibrant agroecological and existential transformation proclaimed by the exuberant prophets of the land-forest (Kopenawa [2010] 2015, dos Santos 2023, Ferreira and Felício 2021).

—Translated by Alex Brostoff and Jamille Pinheiro

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