

Latin American Societies
Current Challenges in Social Sciences

Camila Rocha
Esther Solano
Jonas Medeiros

The Bolsonaro Paradox

The Public Sphere and Right-Wing
Counterpublicity in Contemporary Brazil

**FRIEDRICH
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Latin American Societies

Current Challenges in Social Sciences

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*From Camila to Samuel and for a politics
that, in his words, has “more moms.”
From Esther to Mateo, my light, so that your
Brazil can be a more generous and just
country.
From Jonas to Sérgio, who was sensitive to
what was happening since the Orkut days.*

Foreword

The debate about the current global political moment appears to be organized around two alternative interpretations: that of a “crisis of democracy” or of a “fascist regression.” The terms point to irreconcilable positions. It is not that those who use the label “crisis of democracy” ignore the authoritarian risk, or that those who speak of a “fascist regression” are ignoring that democracy lost its social ballast, to the contrary. But the different views of the situation do not share common ground, be it theoretical or practical.

The “crisis of democracy” view tends to be associated with dominant theories in political science, often identified with institutionalist perspectives. In this strain of thought, the dominant vocabulary is that of “populism,” understood as the enemy of democracy and therefore lacking any positive constructive potential. This diagnosis tends to include two theses to explain the global crisis (derived from the theory of which it is part): people want democracy to provide what it cannot, and in connection, the crisis reveals elements of instability (institutional or noninstitutional) that were hidden before. In this line of thinking, authoritarian threats, the economic crisis, and the connection with previous historic experiences are mostly understood as exogenous and merely related to this fundamental diagnosis. And the only practical off-ramp that this perspective visualizes is a return to the way democracy worked pre-crisis, a move backward in time, perhaps with some lessons learned.

On the other hand, the “fascist regression” reading is usually associated with theories that seek the roots of the current crisis in a combination of an economic crisis, entrenched social authoritarianism, and neoliberal ideology. According to this view, with the global economic crisis of 2008, the neoliberal alliance between forces on the left and right around a limited and limiting democracy fostered a reorganization and strengthening of authoritarian social forces as an alternative to this same neoliberal order that led to the current crisis. Within this interpretation, there are those who view a “radically democratic populism” as a possible practical off-ramp, and there are those who diagnose an irreversible plunge into authoritarianism and processes of de-democratization that could only be abolished through the abolition of capitalism itself. This latter group views capitalism as intrinsically fascist, not merely authoritarian.

If I had to locate *The Bolsonaro Paradox* in contemporary debates, I would say before anything else that it is a book that seeks to escape these alternatives, proposing a recasting of the debate about the current moment in new terms. And this was only possible, in my view, through its *parti pris* for the “social.” It is through the everyday fabric of the social world and the support that it offers—or does not offer—to institutions, narratives, and policies underway that the crisis and its structural elements can be understood.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, this fabric of Brazil’s social world was affected by a double invisibility. The first type of invisibility is longstanding and comes from a dominant public sphere and democratic institutionality that are exclusive and selective in relation to some forms of life. The second type of invisibility has to do with new possibilities of organization and vocalization of social groups allowed by the internet, by platforms, and by social media. The traditional ways of causing invisibility were blinded by alternative forms of visibility. The new invisible could only be seen when there was no more control over it.

From this point of observation, *The Bolsonaro Paradox* was constructed. It was through detailed and close observation of publicity and counterpublicity that the book could avoid the alternatives of the “populist explanation” (in the “crisis of democracy” framework) or “*reductio ad fascismum*” (in the “fascist regression” framework). It is also what simultaneously allows the book to propose a new explanatory frame. An undertaking that is easy to say, but difficult to do. I believe *The Bolsonaro Paradox* was successful in this task, principally for two reasons.

Firstly, it brought together intersections of research and people studying related topics in a similar way, people who more than a few times worked together on specific projects. It is rare to achieve the degree of convergence between different people, concepts, and research groups that is seen here. It is something that can only be explained, ultimately, through a focus on the object of research itself, which was no longer treated as a chance to prove a previous thesis but rather shifted to being viewed according to its own complexity.

The second reason that *The Bolsonaro Paradox* was successful, in my view, is that it knew how to appropriate the guiding idea of “counterpublics” in a very special way. Beginning with Michael Warner’s original formulation, in which counterpublics are those that “consciously and disruptively disobey rules of decorum set by dominant publics,” *The Bolsonaro Paradox* advances toward establishing a typology. According to the book, “there would be a distinction between central and potentially dominant publics on the one hand and peripheral publics on the other, with peripheral publics divided between those that are subaltern and non-subaltern.”

The book seeks and finds its own path without ever abandoning the concreteness of its object of study, the concreteness of Bolsonaro. In order to do this, *The Bolsonaro Paradox* is constantly generous with its readers. When necessary, it offers deep insights into Brazilian history that allow the issue at hand to be understood. When a concept appears that calls for demarcation and definition, it expands on the topic in order to help with reading and allow the positions that are taken to be clearly situated.

This occurs, for example, with the rendering of the Brazilian “right,” which extends for almost 70 years, from the end of the 1950s until the present day. The richness and originality of this reconstruction is evident not only in its accounts of significant oscillations in how this field understands itself, but also in the characterization of the diversity and breadth of its internal debates. This wide-ranging view was possible, on the one hand, through its basis in a pluralistic view of the idea of counterpublics and, on the other, through the execution of in-depth interviews according to an exhaustive mapping of the field and its dimensions, fractures, and strains of thought, always seeking to locate them at decisive moments in Brazilian history.

This also occurs when connecting the guiding idea of counterpublics to one of the book’s main diagnostic assumptions: the crisis of the renewed pact of 1988 that was formed through the enactment of a new constitution after more than 20 years of military dictatorship in Brazil. The new Brazilian pact of the time was only possible, as the book shows, because, in a way, it widened the space of the public sphere, allowing historically excluded groups to have some access to the public debate, even though it was limited. At the same time, the book shows how Brazil’s revolts of June 2013 made clear that the terms of this 1988 pact had become insufficient.

And here, once again, a constant ability to keep its focus makes *The Bolsonaro Paradox* so interesting and original. Instead of examining the different aspects of that crisis, it concentrates on examining the publicity, the development, and the structures of different public spheres. Not least, therefore, June 2013 gives light to a peculiar social accumulation that resulted from the proliferation and use of the internet in Brazil. This analysis is nothing less than an essential piece of the explanatory puzzle of the most relevant social phenomenon of twenty-first century Brazilian history. Because the revolts of June 2013 first arose like a lightning bolt in a blue sky. There was enormous disorientation around an explanation. There was an enormous proliferation of ad hoc explanatory theories. And it is no exaggeration to say that this situation largely continues today.

The Bolsonaro Paradox allows us to understand that disorientation, as well. It shows that, with honorable exceptions, people were failing to look at a fundamental side of that process. Trying to explain social changes of such a magnitude as mere effects of an economic crisis that had not even configured itself in Brazil at the time and aiming to look just at institutions to find design flaws—similar to looking at the social world only to find fascist regression—blocked the ability to see something essential and much more promising in explanatory terms: a reconfiguration of sociability through a complex notion of publicity.

This is what allowed *The Bolsonaro Paradox* to take its explanatory leap forward; it was this focus that allowed it to explain June 2013 as the long process of construction that it was. Because the book shows how the period before June was marked by “the spread of the internet and the proliferation of counterpublics on the left and right.” And this initial “proliferation” gradually, in the post-June period, became “organization.” Peculiar “organizations,” organizational crystallizations surrounding “network nodes.” And, in addition, peculiar hierarchies and structures of identification were formed, those that we find in the classifications and typologies

at which Camila Rocha, Esther Solano, and Jonas Medeiros arrived through extensive and intensive fieldwork.

This generosity of explanation and clarification at each moment that the topic demands it is what allows readers to see Bolsonaro emerge. Here, Bolsonaro is a result, not a cause, and not something that happened by chance. That is because the complexity of all these processes cannot be reduced to one person, even an occupant of the presidency. And it is because Bolsonaro's rise was not inevitable and did not occur in a landscape void of any other possibilities. To the contrary, the book is committed to describing the intense political battles that were occurring off the radar of institutional politics and that only episodically gained visibility in the traditional public sphere. Even when they were exposed in the then-dominant public sphere, their deep social dimensions were not.

Above all, the book shows and demonstrates that the long, subterranean set of processes that led to June 2013 are still underway, in other forms, in new and renewed arrangements. Because reconstructing these processes allows, on one hand, for the understanding of Bolsonaro, it also allows a view of the possibilities beyond him. Those include both the possibilities that were open before his rise to power and those that remain open today and can still bring about other outcomes than Bolsonaro.

It is not that the task of understanding Bolsonaro is trivial; far from it. At least for those who, like the authors of this book, are not content with trivial explanations. The breadth and the depth of analysis that can be found in *The Bolsonaro Paradox* derives from correctly targeting their point of departure: As much as circumstances matter, understanding Bolsonaro's rise to power and the continuation of his presidency as the result of a mere concurrence of circumstances is one of the gravest theoretical errors—and a grave practical error too, though that is not the matter at hand here. There are structural elements behind the rise of Bolsonaro and everything he represents. And that is the perspective of this analysis.

One of the enormous merits of the book is precisely that of showing how circumstantial and isolated factors ended up crystallizing as structural elements. It ended up being a "paradoxical" structure, as the title affirms. That is why the "paradox" only is named at the end. Because the book tells the story of how that paradoxical structure was formed. On one hand, "counterpublicity" itself reveals to be paradoxical. After all, it is built not only through confrontation and conflict with the dominant public sphere and with publics and counterpublics that oppose it according to dominant dichotomies. It is also built within the counterpublics themselves. Yes, Bolsonaro is an anti-establishment president, an anti-system president, and this appears to be sufficiently paradoxical. It is a paradox that must be understood in order to understand his style of government. It is a paradox that must be understood in order to comprehend how he presents himself as the only possible response to the chaos that he himself produces. Because this is not about merely saying that there is a method to the chaos that Bolsonaro produces: rather, the chaos is his own method.

Here, again, the focus of *The Bolsonaro Paradox* and the reason why it is so interesting is evident. Such a characterization is insufficient to meet the concreteness of the Bolsonaro phenomenon. It is at this moment that speaking of Bolsonaro

only as an anti-system president and reducing the problem to his style of government would be vastly insufficient. Just as the premise of a “fascist society” is equally insufficient. Because that was not what the trio that authored this book found in the fieldwork they carried out. What they found instead was a paradoxical logic that extends in three dimensions which must be considered together in order to be duly understood. It is at this moment that speaking of “Bolsonarism” is necessary in order to understand the paradox in its entire scope.

The most salient and relevant of these dimensions of the paradox is the maintenance of an anti-system perspective by a right-wing counterpublic that eventually saw itself represented in the maximum systemic position, that of the Brazilian presidency. After all, how can a social positionality that becomes dominant maintain its self-identification as marginal and that of contesting the system? Last but not least, this dimension of the paradox is the most salient and relevant because it suggests a paradoxical position that cannot be maintained for very long. It suggests that an attempt at shutting down the democratic regime in Brazil may not be merely one option, but perhaps the only possible line of action in order for right-wing counterpublics to maintain the position they won without self-destructing.

Ultimately, another dimension of the paradox comes from the fact that Bolsonaro maintains the support of a substantial portion of the electorate even amid circumstances as difficult and dramatic for any politician as the pandemic, the economic crisis, and the rise in unemployment. This is due, surely, to the fact that Bolsonaro rules only for those who support him, the group that he considers “authentic Brazilians.” But, as the book also shows, it also derives from the fact that a relevant number of those supporters see no other possible figures, beyond Bolsonaro, who might represent them.

And it is precisely there that a third dimension of the paradox appears: the right-wing counterpublics, which first united as part of a large anti-system front, the “new right,” begin to diverge and oppose each other radically. The most salient result of the large front was the election of a supporter of the military dictatorship, which stands opposite to the positions of many right-wing counterpublics. On this matter, the book once again reveals a decisive practical point: ignoring these fissures and splits in the right-wing counterpublics and artificially flattening their differences and divergences can result in strengthening the hard-authoritarian nucleus inside this multiplicity of counterpublics.

For all of these reasons, *The Bolsonaro Paradox* is not simply “the paradox of Bolsonaro” but also and simultaneously “the paradox as Bolsonaro.” Bolsonaro is rather a possible configuration of a constellation of elements. The great challenge is to identify those elements and show how they assemble in Bolsonaro, and also simultaneously show how Bolsonaro himself unites them and continues to maintain their amalgamation, even in circumstances as ever-changing and extraordinary as the current Covid-19 pandemic.

It is procedures and premises like these that allow for proposals of informed comparisons with other configurations, in other constellations of elements, in other time periods, and in other places. What projects Bolsonaro beyond his circumstances is that, as soon as he is understood, his rise becomes a model. Without losing

any concreteness, this analysis allows Bolsonaro to no longer be seen as eccentric or abstruse. In other words, Bolsonaro is no longer simply a “Brazilian deviation.”

This shows that the reader has in their hands what is simply one of the most complete and successful attempts to explain Bolsonaro and what he represents today in Brazil. In this book, they simultaneously have a proposal of understanding the current moment that aims to go beyond the mere ideas of “populism” or “fascism”—and because of this, these research findings also go beyond a mere “Bolsonaro case”—and a precise reconstruction of this specific phenomenon that will allow the reader to find echoes in other experiences and other places. Because the greatest possible threat to democratic coexistence would be to transform the Bolsonaro phenomenon into an exotic, folkloric, and distant episode. And that is exactly what this idea of a “paradox” aims to avoid.

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June 2021

Marcos Nobre

Preface

Jair Bolsonaro is, without a doubt, the world's most radical far-right president who was democratically elected in recent decades. Under his governance, Brazil was considered the country that worst handled the Covid-19 pandemic, with over 500,000 deaths by June 2021, according to government statistics. In the previous month, Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo, blamed for Brazil's lack of vaccines, resigned under several different political pressures. A career diplomat who was recommended for his cabinet position by philosopher Olavo de Carvalho—who drew close to the Bolsonaro family years ago—Araújo considered the World Health Organization “globalist” and argued that the virus, which he called the “communa-virus,” was an ideological device of a “globalist project” that would lead to communism.

Few political analysts took Bolsonaro's 2018 presidential candidacy seriously. Even fewer tried to explain his victory without referring simply to his special circumstances in the election, including the fact that Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the country's most popular political leader, did not participate in the race; that campaign television spots were shortened in comparison with previous years; and that Bolsonaro was victim to a knife attack aiming to assassinate him 1 month before the first round of voting, which earned him increased media attention and allowed him to skip most of the debates with other candidates.

While all of those factors contributed to his rise to power, understanding it more deeply requires going back in time. After all, Bolsonaro's aim is to destroy a fragile *post-bourgeois public sphere* that was institutionalized in Brazil with the democratic pact established in 1988 after 20 years of military dictatorship. To that end, Bolsonaro and his supporters employ a discursive strategy called *right-wing counterpublicity*: an aggressive rhetoric filled with curse words and acid humor—political incorrectness—in order to restore traditional hierarchies, values, and ways of life. By occupying the Brazilian State, Bolsonaro created a new dynamic in the public debate: *dominant counterpublicity*, an unstable phenomenon based on reiterated attacks on institutions that seek to substitute their mild progressive foundations and foster an authoritarian political culture.

The use of ideas such as a post-bourgeois public sphere, right-wing counterpublicity, and dominant counterpublicity to explain contemporary Brazilian politics came about through a relatively inductive process as we took a series of qualitative data into account. The analysis we present in this book includes excerpts of interviews we conducted over the years with members of Brazil's right and Bolsonaro supporters, who are identified in bold text in the chapters that follow. All of us had already individually conducted qualitative studies with both activists and everyday people for some years, when, in 2017, Esther sought to interview Bolsonaro supporters after carrying out several surveys in protests for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff. She made her first contact with Camila, who interviewed right-wing activists and leaders, and they then joined forces to understand the motivations of Bolsonaro voters more deeply. At the same time, Jonas and Camila, members of a research group on the public sphere at the Brazilian Center of Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP), began to use the concepts of publics and counterpublics to understand their research findings: the emergence of a new feminist activism in Brazil and the emergence of a new right, respectively. Soon after, both began to use the same concepts to understand the dynamics of Bolsonarism, to the thrill of Esther, who considered the approach more intriguing than the frequently used concept of populism, as it captured dynamics that often remain invisible in typical analyses of Brazilian politics.

To that end, we expose our theoretical premises in Chap. 1, considering the structural transformations in the Brazilian public sphere in historical perspective. We highlight both a sociopolitical dimension, showing advances and retreats as different social actors are included or excluded from the traditional public sphere, and a technical-cultural dimension, analyzing how different media condition the public sphere.

In Chap. 2, we analyze the emergence of a new right in Brazil beginning in 2006, more than 10 years before Bolsonaro's election as president. At that time, the traditional right did not identify as such due to the stigma of having participated in the military dictatorship. They had begun to work inside the parameters of the pact of 1988, leaving groups that were opposed to the pact without representation. Those groups united as a new "shameless" and more radical right. Based on the claim that a "leftist cultural hegemony" existed in the country, initially proposed by philosopher Olavo de Carvalho, the new right began to spread counter-hegemonic discourses that in large part relied on aggressive rhetoric that broke with decorum: counterpublicity. The formation of counterpublics related to the new right permitted broader circulation of an economically ultraliberal and socially conservative ideology on Orkut, a social networking site created by Google in 2004, and later in dominant publics via book publishing, the education system, the mainstream media, and the political system.

In Chap. 3, we trace how institutional advances and demonstrations of women and the LGBT+ community, among others, were felt by conservative parts of Brazilian society as a true "progressive shock." In the 2010s, different sectors of society began to demand a deepening of the post-bourgeois public sphere, affirming their rights both in the institutional arena and through shocking performances that

questioned dominant codes, especially regarding gender and sexuality. The nascent new right, which had until then been dominated by ultraliberals, allied itself with a growing conservative backlash to these demands. This bore fruit both in institutional politics and in the public debate, through the spread of conservative counterpublicity that aimed to restore traditional norms, hierarchies, and ways of life.

The heightening of tensions fueled a new cycle of protests that peaked in Brazil's June 2013 demonstrations, when millions of people took to the streets across the country to protest the political system's self-shielding from their demands. Small groups of ultraliberals and even supporters of the military dictatorship were among the protesters. While groups on the political left continued to push for social rights, groups mobilized by the emerging new right began a campaign to impeach president Dilma Rousseff 6 days after her 2014 reelection was announced. Chapter 4 explores the mass participation in this campaign, which was spurred by anti-Workers' Party sentiment, anti-corruption sentiment, and by a deep and widespread mistrust in the political-party system. The chapter also registers how Jair Bolsonaro's presidential campaign was uniquely able to channel the sentiments of anger and joy that coexisted in the streets through establishing a figure perceived as a sincere, authentic, and honest political outsider.

Overall, we try to accompany the accelerated technical-cultural, sociocultural, and sociopolitical transformations of the Brazilian public sphere through the joint analysis of publics and counterpublics, be they subaltern or not. While studies of non-subaltern counterpublics have multiplied in the Global North, this book seeks to develop an original contribution in considering the phenomenon from the Global South, using an interpretive approach that does not abandon the normative reflections of Critical Theory. Bolsonaro's government is addressed in Chap. 5, in which we seek to outline the different paradoxes that we have identified as characteristics of the Bolsonaro phenomenon, highlighting the effects of what we view as a dominant Bolsonarist counterpublicity that aims to destroy the pact of 1988 and disintegrate Brazil's post-bourgeois public sphere, constantly signaling the restoration of a new bourgeois autocracy inspired by the military dictatorship.

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São Paulo, Brazil

Camila Rocha
Esther Solano
Jonas Medeiros

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