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Protest Movements as Media Vehicles of the Brazilian New Right

A Study of Populist Discourses

Nicole McLean

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In memory of Roger Frankel,
without whom this book may not have occurred

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PRAISE FOR *PROTEST MOVEMENTS AS MEDIA VEHICLES OF THE BRAZILIAN NEW RIGHT*

"This exciting book is of interest to scholars of right-wing populism worldwide. McLean offers a gripping analysis of the tactics of mobilization and communication methods of Brazil's New Right during a period of intense political ferment. Evaluating the New Right not solely as a political movement, but also as a media phenomenon, she evaluates the hybrid role these new actors have adopted in recent Brazilian democratic politics, both as policy advocates and as propagandists."

—Matthew Taylor, *American University, USA*

"McLean has made an important contribution to our understanding of the contemporary Right in Brazil. This study clearly demonstrates that these movements of the New Right are primarily driven by opportunistic, superficial and exaggerated hubris, which has less to do with political, economic, social and cultural policy as such, and more to do with egos and finding ways to leave their mark on history – no matter what the consequences."

—Ralph Newmark, *The University of Melbourne, Australia*

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About the Author

Nicole McLean holds a joint Ph.D. from The University of Melbourne and The University of São Paulo. This book is the product of her Ph.D. research, which analysed the major right-wing protest movements in Brazil in the lead-up to the 2018 federal elections.

Prior to this, Nicole was a translator in France and holds a double Masters in French Translation Studies from Monash University and Jean Moulin Lyon 3 University.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Paulista Avenue, São Paulo
21st October 2018

The sun is beginning to set behind the city buildings, casting shadows over Paulista Avenue. A stray beam of light reflects off one of the long glass windows of the MASP museum to my right, blinding me for a split second, before I regain sight of what is in front of me. Standing on the protest truck overlooking thousands of people that fill the street, I film with my iPhone the cheering supporters who resemble a sea of bright green and yellow—the national colours of Brazil. These colours have come to represent the New Right and are a stark difference from the red that is symbolic of the socialist *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party), locally known as the PT.

It is almost the end of the *#PTNuncaMais* (#PTNeverAgain) protest, one week out from the final election round. A block away in the distance, I can see the huge inflatable Lula, one of the PT's founders and former president of Brazil, in prison attire towering over an adjacent protest truck. Hundreds of Brazilian flags are being waved in the air and numerous smart phones are held up high, all recording glimpses of this historic moment going live to thousands of social media accounts. They had become nodules in the network of online media sources. The crowd is eagerly attentive to every word being said, despite the blasting sound of horns carrying across the masses of people and occasional fire crackers going

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off in the surrounds. The fierce sensation in the atmosphere, balancing between excitement and apprehension, is palpable. Change is in progress.

I have been invited to the protest by *Movimento Brasil Livre* (Free Brazil Movement), or MBL for short, one of the main movements that led the pro-impeachment demonstrations against former PT president Dilma Rousseff. Some of the other main movements, including *VemPraRua* (Come To The Street) and *NasRuas* (In The Streets), are also present. Their trucks are stationed a block apart from each other in a line down Paulista Avenue.

MBL's truck is the only one that is low to the ground with a stage protruding out into the jam-packed crowd, much like a portable urban theatre ready to showcase the latest political act. One of the few female MBL members sits in front of me, filming the events live to the group's Facebook page. MBL is undoubtedly the most theatrical out of all the movements and is gifted at combining politics with pop culture. Their media characteristics and emphasis on the latest online trends certainly play a significant part in the success of MBL as the most well-known, right-wing movement in Brazil.

The three hours of public speeches has come to an end and it is now time to rev up the crowd one last time to finish the protest on a high. One of the MBL members starts yelling a popular chant into the microphone:

> *Olé, oléee*
> *Olé, oléee*
> *Tamos na rua pra derrubar o PT* (We are in the streets to oust the PT)
> *Olé, oléee*
> *Olé, oléee*
> *Tamos na rua pra derrubar o PT* (We are in the streets to oust the PT)
> *Chora petista, bolivariano, a roubalheira do PT tá acabando* (Cry Boliviarian petista, the robbery of the PT is over)
> *Sua conduta é imoral, velhos princípios da CF nacional* (Your behaviour is immoral, old principles of the national federal constitution)

The thousands of *militantes* crammed in front of the MBL truck like sardines are chanting in unison, not missing a word. Renan Santos, the political mastermind behind MBL, takes to the microphone for the final time. "*Quem não pula é comunista! Quem não pula é comunista!*" (Whoever doesn't jump is a communist! Whoever doesn't jump is a communist!), he shouts as he and a bunch of other MBL young men begin to jump up and down on the stage. The crowd roars, everyone throws their fists in the air and jumps around like festival-goers in one huge mosh pit.

It is as if I have scored VIP tickets to a popular rock concert and am looking out at the screaming fans from backstage. I stare in awe, with mixed feelings of shock and amazement. How have these everyday *Paulistanos* (people from the city of São Paulo) become so engaged in politics? How have they acquired complete disgust for Lula and the PT? How has corruption become so intolerable in a society that has, since its colonisation by the Portuguese, had its foundations rooted in fraudulent practices and impunity? And what role did social media play in all this?

On board the MBL truck at the *#PTNuncaMais* (#PTNeverAgain) protest
in front of MASP on Paulista Avenue
21st October 2018

In early 2018, I went to live in São Paulo to carry out ethnographic fieldwork during the 2018 elections. Throughout my two years living and researching in Brazil, I participated in several mass protests of both the Left and Right side of politics. I interviewed key members of prominent protest movements of the Brazilian New Right, employees of large companies involved in the Car Wash investigations, as well as specialists in the fields of Brazilian politics, media, law and anti-corruption.

I also analysed three of the main right-wing movements' Facebook posts, including those of MBL, VemPraRua and NasRuas (from here on referred to as "the movements"), to reveal which issues circulated the most among their publics. My intention was to illuminate the media dimensions of the movements. More specifically, I investigated the formation of different right-wing publics through the circulation of populist discourses on the movements' Facebook pages in 2017, namely anti-corruption, neoliberal, punitive, conservative and anti-elite discourses. These discourses are considered the prelude to the election of far-right President of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, in 2018.

While emphasis is predominantly on the movements' use of Facebook, the findings in this book are applicable to other social media and messaging platforms. Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok and Telegram have all become melting pots where right-wing philosophies are brewed. Following bans on Facebook and Twitter in 2019, the far-right migrated to Telegram (Urman & Katz, 2020). However, through personal observation and monitoring of different social media platforms, the right-wing actors in this book publish similar content across all platforms. Analysis of Facebook content, therefore, remains highly relevant today. The principal affordance of all these platforms is their sharing function. It is the shareability of the content produced on these sites that has the greatest impact on public opinion.

Brazil is one of the top countries for Facebook users in the world with 125.14 million people using the platform in 2017 (Statista, 2020). In comparison with their total population size of 207.8 million for that year (Worldometers, 2019), that equates to approximately 60% of the Brazilian population that use Facebook. Why is the focus of this book on the year 2017? Well, most previous studies on the movements look at their role during the lead-up to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016, whereas I am interested in their role forming right-wing publics and constructing candidates prior to the 2018 elections. After the impeachment, I view the *modus operandi* of the movements to be grounded in the production of political propaganda on social media aimed at influencing public political debate and voting behaviour. To this end, this book studies the reaction of the New Right to political and cultural phenomena.

Before going any further, it is worth explaining what the term 'New Right' means in the Brazilian context. I adopt Chaloub and Perlatto's (2016) interpretation of New Right actors in Brazil as holding common characteristics including “criticism of the role of the State in the regulation of the free market, in the promotion of income redistribution and in the execution of affirmative policies aimed at the inclusion of ‘minorities’, as well as strong objection to the Left, in general, and to the PT, in particular” (Chaloub & Perlatto, 2016: 39). Deregulation, tax reduction, privatisation, and strong conservative morals are some of the salient values the New Right upholds.

The phenomenon of the New Right in Brazil has strengthened over the last decade. “[A]lthough the presence of right-wing intellectuals is not a new phenomenon in the history of Brazil, the protagonist position they hold in public debate is a novelty” (ibid., 39). Recently, right-wing narratives and debates, including socially conservative world views and liberal economic ideals, have moved to the centre of public political debate. New-right actors are predominantly from the south-eastern regions of the country (Codato et al., 2015: 134) and are comprised of workers and new leaders (ibid., 139), such as those of the movements. Throughout this book, the terms New Right and right-wing are employed interchangeably to refer to such political actors. The concept of the New Right is developed further in the Historical Context section later on in this chapter.

The movements started out by organising street protests, which is why they are referred to as *movimentos de rua* (street movements) in Brazil. When the movements publish videos and photos of thousands of people in the street in front of their protest trucks, this undoubtedly legitimises them. However, their success at organising mass protests attracted millions of followers to their Facebook pages, reaching far greater publics than those in the street. This transformed the movements’ Facebook pages into virtual public squares and places of protest. Essentially, the movements morphed into online media vehicles that play an important role in distributing right-wing narratives to as many listeners as possible.

My definition of a “media vehicle” incorporates a variety of communications functions including journalism, reporting, commentating, advertisement, marketing, public relations, media production, editing, publishing, and news redistribution. The movements, particularly MBL, act as journalists, reporters and commentators when they write articles, report daily political news in their nightly news segments, and provide right-wing commentary of political affairs in their YouTube videos and live streamings. They perform the roles of advertisers, marketers and public relations officers when they produce political propaganda and promotional material for political allies and their own movements. They are at once media producers, editors and publishers when they simultaneously create, edit, and post content online. Finally, they act as news redistribution channels when they republish mainstream media news items already in circulation. However, the movements are also militant when they organise mass protests to showcase political allies and create harmful content that cripples the reputation of political opponents—activities that clearly lie within the scope of political and social movements.

A social process is only considered a social movement when it achieves conflictual collective action through dense informal networks and a collective identity among participants (della Porta & Diani, 2020: 20). In this sense, the movements fulfil the requirements to classify as a social movement. They engage in political and cultural conflict that opposes progressive changes in society, while simultaneously promoting conservative alternatives. Their vast network of followers on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp bring strangers together under the umbrella of indignation.

Beyond the many protests and online campaigns, the movements managed to form collective identities among their followers. According to co-founder of MBL, Renan Santos, each movement represents a different faction of the New Right. MBL aligns with the neoliberal faction, VemPraRua the anti-corruption faction and NasRuas is a mix of both the anti-corruption and military factions (Renan Santos, interview, 30th August 2018). However, absent from this perspective is the movements' role in producing and disseminating critical political debate in the public sphere. The hordes of social media content published by the movements signify they have embodied many of the functions of the press—or as I term it, "media vehicles".

Regarding liberal economic debates, the term liberalism, or liberal, is used in Brazil to refer to economic freedoms such as reduction of the size of the state and tax cuts. This is different to the liberalism in the US, which takes the form of social freedoms and refers to progressivism, human rights and the like. To avoid any confusion, I have chosen to employ the term neoliberalism, or neoliberal, to refer to liberalism in the Brazilian sense.

One point of difference in this book to other studies on the movements is the ethnographic aspect. I perform case studies on the movements and therefore my research questions revolve around what these groups are actually doing in Brazil—I argue, in part being media vehicles. In my quest to demonstrate how the movements operate as media vehicles, I pose the following three research questions:

1. *How do the movements act as media vehicles of the New Right?*
2. *In what ways do the movements increase corruption awareness?*
3. *What were the most popular discourses shared by the movements' followers on Facebook in 2017 to help form publics of the New Right?*

The assumption is that the movements increase corruption awareness and reputational risk of politicians and big business involved in corruption scandals by acting as media vehicles. They can be considered a dialect or derivative of mainstream media when they redistribute news items already in circulation. However, they do not adhere to formal journalistic practices and instead choose to employ more informal, critical language prominent on social media, including ridiculing and demeaning opponents. Through the production and circulation of political content on Facebook, the movements help to create various right-wing publics. In this sense, they have become media, corruption accountability, cultural, as well as political institutions.

By providing some answers to these questions, this book is relevant to different disciplines. It adds value to literature in the fields of: Brazilian politics, as it explores the development of publics of the New Right; social media, and its performance as a dialect of mainstream media; and finally, anti-corruption, through the movements' use of Facebook to increase awareness of corruption and reputational risk of wrongdoers.

Today, there is much criticism of Facebook with academics and the mainstream press often referring to the *dangers* of social media, the rise of *fake news*, and infiltration of *polarisation* among citizens—the latter having reached a critical level in Brazil during the 2016 impeachment and 2018 elections which persists to this day. While this book does not intend (or have the space) to engage in lengthy debates on fake news and polarisation, I do seek to highlight some of these issues in my short diary entries throughout the book and acknowledge that these phenomena are considered to impact public political debate. They, therefore, merit further in-depth research. Instead, this book takes a different stance and looks at Facebook through a more optimistic lens in terms of its ability to increase the reputational risk of corrupt actors and voice widespread dissent with both the political and cultural establishment. Part of the novelty of these right-wing protagonists is their usage of social media and mass protests in an almost theatrical way, as stages to promote their political views and demean opponents.

For reasons of space, this book does not look at mainstream media per se, but it investigates the movements' role as media vehicles redistributing news items already in circulation in the mainstream press and as entities that are critical of mainstream media companies, such as Globo, as we shall see in Chapter 6.

I confess that my opinion throughout the book is pulled to the Left and the Right of the political divide, demonstrating my central stance on the political spectrum. While carrying out my interviews with the movement leaders, I frequently felt myself according with their worldview to an extent. To balance this out, I was fortunate enough to be invited to participate in a research group at the University of São Paulo (USP) known as *Monitor do Debate Político no Meio Digital* (Monitor of Online Political Debate), or simply Monitor for shot. Monitor seeks to understand political phenomena from a progressive perspective. This was a controversial move by me, as the most central movement in this book, MBL, was a frequent target of Monitor. I often felt like a spy interviewing and observing the founders of the movements, while simultaneously attending meetings at Monitor. However, I always remained within the professional limits of a doctoral researcher. I explain my involvement in Monitor further in Chapter 2.

The rest of this chapter is comprised of four sections. Firstly, I explain my personal connection to the topic and Brazil in general. Then, I place the book in the recent historical context, which aids understanding of current tensions in Brazilian politics and society as well as the rise of the New Right. Next, I provide short descriptions of each of the right-wing movements under scrutiny. Finally, I detail chapter by chapter the book ahead.

ABC Connection

Two key events in my life have brought me to write this book. My school exchange to Belgium in 2005 and volunteering at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. When telling people about this research project, one of the first questions that I am asked is: "*Why are you interested in corruption in Brazil?*". This is a fair question. The connection between an Australian, Brazil and Corruption is not an obvious one, and the context that sparked my intrigue is even more asymmetric.

A scholarship to go on exchange to Belgium as a 16-year-old changed my perspective of the world and sent me on my current path. Surprisingly, the majority of exchange students were from Latin America. One afternoon, while in a park lazing on the grass dappled with sunlight and shade from golden-green oak trees, a young Venezuelan girl with long dark hair and hazel-coloured eyes stood reciting incidents of corruption that plagued her country. Emotional, with tears rolling down her plump cheeks, she detailed personal experiences of confrontations with government and armed forces. Other Latino students began expressing their solidarity. Next, this wave of despair came over her face as she acknowledged the impossibility of ever being able to do anything about the corruption in her country. She was helpless, powerless.

To keep in touch during our stays with different host families in Belgium, this group of Latino students introduced me to a new social networking platform, which had only been created in the US the year prior. That platform was Facebook. Over the next decade, the number of users on the platform grew to be in the billions and it became an important tool used in various political uprisings worldwide. Could Facebook be the answer to the Venezuelan girl's cries? Had social media platforms given power to the people to ensure corrupt officials are held responsible for their crimes? Or had it succumbed to letting radical and destructive voices into the public sphere?

Uncertain of how to act upon this newly acquired intrigue for corruption in Latin America, I continued my studies in French. In early 2014, I was back living in Europe, this time the Mediterranean city of Marseille, and coincidently I had just started taking Brazilian Portuguese classes when a certain corruption scandal came to light. I recall former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff regularly on TV, muffled by press microphones, as the number of corruption allegations at Petrobras, the state-controlled oil company, grew. Eager to improve my Portuguese and visit the *cidade maravilhosa*, I applied to volunteer at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games—my application was successful.

By mid-2016, I found myself on-board a crammed *carioca* train, heading away from the city centre and into the outer suburb of Deodoro where I worked as a volunteer at the Olympic Equestrian. Fortunately for this book, my trip to Brazil coincided with the impeachment trial of Dilma Rousseff amidst sprawling corruption allegations and heavy media and public criticism of her administration. Reflecting upon my own motivations for undertaking this book, it was for similar reasons to the public criticism at the time—total outrage that government officials had engaged in such high degrees of malfeasance and misuse of public funds. I confess it is bizarre to hold such strong feelings for a country that is not my own. I can only imagine how I would have felt if I were Brazilian. I would have been mad. Coming from my middle-class upbringing, I would have been mad staring out of the cramped train window, condensation trickling down the glass from the suffocating amount of human breath inside, at the poverty in the favelas on my way to the world-class equestrian competition. I would have been mad knowing that billions of *reais* had been used to construct the world's largest sporting event, despite the city being surrounded by impoverished slums. As I shall show by the end of this book, outrage is a key ingredient to political activism.

Then, on the 31st of August 2016, with only one month of my stay in Brazil left, the final vote on Dilma's impeachment in the Senate took place. I recall sitting at the kitchen table in my Brazilian host family's house, located in the coastal suburb of *Recreio dos Bandeirantes*, watching the televised voting session on TV. In a theatrical performance, senators preached to punish corrupt wrongdoers, waving their fingers high in the air along with the occasional Brazilian flag. They knew how to make a media spectacle. The Senate formally removed Dilma from office for fiscal pedalling prior to her re-election in 2014, although spared her political rights.

Later that night, my host brother Gustavo was going to meet some of his friends at a local bar, *Bar da Zefa*, to celebrate and he invited me along. As we approached the street lined with *boteco* bars, Gustavo warned me to keep alert because things could get out of hand and turn violent quickly. The street was crammed with young people, buzzing with a mixture of joy and relief, all with plastic cups filled with beer in their hands. Every couple of minutes someone would yell, "*fora Dilma!*" (Oust Dilma!) or "*fora PT!*" (Oust the PT!). A couple of young men sped past on motorbikes, showing off doing wheelies amid green smoke from flairs that slowly wafted through the air. This was more than an average night at the local bar, it felt more like a carnival *bloco* party in the street.

I was shocked at how everyone was so cheerful and happy. How could these Brazilians celebrate such a traumatic political event? Why were they so pleased that the PT was no longer in power? Was public animosity towards the PT purely linked to the corruption probe or was it more complex than that? And what role did social media play in this novel and decentralised media scenario? It was at that moment when I realised I had to come back to Brazil.

To comprehend the present-day tensions in Brazilian society, one must understand the historical context of the country's past.

Historical Context

In this section, I depict the recent historical context in which the current tensions in Brazilian society arose. The suppression of right-wing ideology following the military dictatorship, election of the PT and rise of *petismo* and *lulismo*, quick succession of progressive measures, rampant government spending, and sprawling corruption allegations are all important factors that fed into the growth of support for the New Right.

Brazil endured almost a 20-year-long military regime from 1964 to 1985, which was notoriously oppressive and violent. The government of the regime and its supporters are now referred to as the Old Right (Codato et al., 2015: 117). In the immediate period following the fall of the regime, left-wing ideology was the dominant political force in Brazil. In an interview with Christian Lohbauer, professor of political science at USP, he explains that the traumatic experience of living under authoritarian rule influenced the following generations of intellectuals who were subsequently educated from a social democratic perspective.

> During the dictatorship, all professors, political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists were anti-regime. They all got together against the military. Therefore, the following generations of intellectuals in Brazil were trained with left-wing logic… they were all socialists… no one from my generation [people in their 50's] understands that democracy can be neoliberal. (Christian Lohbauer, interview, 5th February 2019)

All over Latin America, in the wake of the various military dictatorships, the Left was viewed as the resistance and always associated with democracy. Consequently, the generations afterwards were frequently hostile to anything right-wing and this was reflected in the formation of new political parties.

In the beginning of the 1980s, these intellectuals began to construct political alliances. This marked the start of the *abertura*—the political opening. From 1983 to 1984, the political movement *Diretas Já* (Direct

Elections Now) drew thousands of Brazilians to the streets to demand for direct presidential elections. The movement was a success and in 1985 Brazil had its first direct elections in almost 30 years, electing Tancredo Neves of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB) as president of the country. However, Neves never took office because he became gravely ill on the eve of his inauguration and died. Neves' Vice President, José Sarney, also from the PMDB, took office for the rest of the mandate.

In 1989, with the help of the Globo News network, Fernando Collor, depicted as the saviour Brazil needed, was elected president. His reign was again short-lived as he resigned amidst his impeachment trial for corruption in 1992. In a show of political déjà vu, his Vice President, Itamar Franco, from the PMDB, took office until the end of the presidential term. Following on from this, during a period of severe hyperinflation, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, from the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), was elected in 1994 and again in 1998. Architect of the *Plano Real* (a set of measures to stabilise the Brazilian economy), the social-democrat has been widely credited with lowering the inflation.

One of the political parties that was founded towards the end of the regime was the Workers' Party (the PT) in 1980. It became known for its "PT way of governing", or *petismo*, including popular mobilisation and participation, socioeconomic redistribution, and alliances with trade unions and left-leaning social movements (Baiocchi et al., 2012: 18). In October of 2002, former trade unionist Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) was elected president of Brazil.

During his first mandate, Lula became known worldwide for the implementation of the successful conditional cash transfer program, *Bolsa-Família*. It is aimed at improving the lives of the country's poorest population (Singer, 2009: 91), which gives financial support to disadvantaged families under the condition that their children attend school and receive vaccinations. Furthermore, when Lula was in power, the minimum wage increased, unemployment dropped by over 2% (ibid., 93–94) and the Brazilian economy experienced great economic growth due to the commodities boom of the early 2000s. This saw Brazil become a global leading producer of mineral, agricultural and other primary products (Kingstone, 2012). These various economic factors are credited for lifting some 40 million people out of extreme poverty by 2013 (Watts, 2013) and contributing to the expansion of Brazil's middle class.

Amidst the boom, a large corruption scandal known as *Mensalão* (big monthly payment) was revealed in 2005 and involved a vote-buying scheme, which implicated dozens of politicians. Despite his government being tainted with corruption allegations, Lula was re-elected in 2006. The re-election of Lula, winning by around 20 million votes for the second time in a row, confirmed that the political phenomenon known as *lulismo* had emerged (Singer, 2009: 83). *Lulismo* refers to the politics of President Lula and specific economic policy changes during his mandates, such as the minimum wage increase, *Bolsa-Família* (ibid., 93) and increased accessibility to credit cards even to the poorest sections of society (Baiocchi et al., 2012: 20). The main social base of *lulismo* is made up of the new lower-middle class known as the 'C class' and the lower class (Singer, 2009: 86).

As such, Lula left office in 2010 with the highest approval rating on record in Brazil, and arguably the world, with 87% of the population in favour of him and 80% in favour of the PT (Bonin, 2010). Lula's high approval rating paved the way for his successor Dilma Rousseff, who was a former member of the board of directors of Petrobras, to be elected the first female president of Brazil in 2010. Unfortunately for Dilma, the halting commodities boom that resulted in economic stagnation and rising concerns around her ability to govern the country—which would eventually bring about her downfall—meant her time in office was not as glorified as Lula's, economically speaking. But, it was marked with a series of progressive measures.

According to postdoctoral fellow in Brazilian politics, Camila Rocha (2020), several progressive measures happened in the early 2010s and were a shock to conservatives. These included the Federal Supreme Court's recognition of marriage of same-sex couples as a family entity (Santos, 2011), the legalisation of abortion in cases of anencephaly (Santos, 2012), and the Quotas Law that saw Brazilian federal institutions reserve 50% of vacancies for students from public schools, and black and indigenous students (Mendes, 2012).

It was in this context that Brazil saw the rise of the New Right. Taking a global outlook of the New Right in Latin America, it can be summarised as follows:

> In short, the New Right in Latin America is a political stance that preserves elements of the Old Right: capitalism as an economic model and traditional moral principles; however, this ideologically renewed Right recognises and accepts the political advantages of social policies implemented by the Left in the region, while seeking to detach itself from the memory of military

> dictatorial regimes supported by the parties of the Old Right. (Codato et al., 2015: 121)

The New Right acknowledges the Left as part of the political system and is happy to benefit from some of its social measures, while decrying the Left in general. In Brazil, as I have already pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, characteristics of the New Right also include fierce disapproval and criticism of Lula and the PT in phenomena that have become known as *antilulismo* (anti-Lula sentiment) and *antipetismo* (anti-PT sentiment). Such sentiments were bolstered by mainstream media during the *Mensalão* corruption scandal in 2005–2006 when the words "*petista*" and "*mensaleiro*" became swearwords synonymous for "communist" or "terrorist" (Lima, 2015). The 2006 electoral period also saw the creation of an anti-Lula community on Orkut—then the most popular social networking platform in the country (Rovai, 2018: 297)—called "Out with Lula 2006" (ibid., 298). This can be considered an early marker of online activism promoting anti-Lula rhetoric.

Furthermore, in the decade of the 2010s Brazil hosted three of the world's biggest sporting events: the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup, 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympic Games. Some of the stadiums constructed for these events would result in other corruption scandals further down the line, such as those concerning the Car Wash investigations that I soon describe. The rampant government spending on the construction of sporting stadiums and other related infrastructure projects caused further tensions to rise among Brazilians who would have rather seen the public funds spent on improving education, security and the health system, among other public services.

By June 2013, a massive and unprecedented wave of street protests broke out throughout the entire country. The initial trigger for the protests was the bus fare increase of R$0.20 cents, or about 6.7 per cent, which the then-Mayor of São Paulo, Fernando Haddad of the PT, implemented in June of that year. One key turning point was when news reporter Giuliana Vallone was shot in the eye with a rubber bullet by police and subsequently hospitalised on the 13th June (UOL, 2013). Thousands of frustrated people from varying ages and ideologies came to the streets to express their abhorrence. What started out as anger over the price hike had quickly snowballed to incorporate several other issues including police brutality, corruption, deteriorating public services, insufficient infrastructure and growing concerns over Dilma's and the PT's incompetency in running the country. As a consequence, Dilma's approval rating plummeted (Datafolha, 2013).

In a continuing downward spiral, the largest corruption scandal in the history of Brazil, *Petrolão* (big oil), was revealed to the public in March 2014. What started out as a routine investigation into money laundering at a petrol station and car wash in Brasília, the nation's capital, led to the revelation of a complex multinational corruption scheme. *Petrolão* revealed a decade-long international corruption cartel whereby top executives at the oil company Petrobras granted overpriced contracts to key construction firms, namely Odebrecht, and then siphoned off the illicit benefits among themselves and dozens of politicians to finance political parties and electoral campaigns. The investigations into the money-laundering cartel were given the code name *Operação Lava Jato* (Operation Car Wash), which is a play on words that simultaneously refers to the location where the scheme was uncovered and the type of corruption used. The Car Wash investigations led to the arrest of several high-profile political and business figures and dozens more have either been prosecuted or are awaiting trial. Such punishment of elite figures was a welcomed novelty to the Brazilian judicial system.

However, *Petrolão* left a large majority of Brazilians feeling a sense of indignation and shame of their political class, so much so that it overshadowed positive achievements during Dilma's reign such as the removal of Brazil from the UN World Hunger Map in 2014 (MDS, 2014). According to professor of international relations at the Federal University of São Paulo, Esther Solano, whose research interests also focus on social movements and urban conflicts, right-wing groups saw an opportunity to seize public frustration for the political class, which stemmed from the June 2013 protests, and turned it into anti-PT sentiment by the 2014 elections.

> There was a general dissatisfaction with politicians, anti-politics sentiment, and they captured this dissatisfaction and transformed it into *antipetismo* (anti-PT). This was when the polarisation started. So, anti-establishment became anti-PT. Because in 2013, public discontent was more over corruption, education, the public health system, generic social issues and against the traditional political parties. In 2014, the right-wing groups, VemPraRua, MBL and Revoltados Online, captured this discontent and transformed it into anti-PT, pro-impeachment and, above all, anti-corruption sentiment. (Esther Solano, interview, 8th September 2018)