FICTITIOUS POLARIZATIONS: THE FAR RIGHT, CORPORATE POWER AND SOCIAL STRUGGLES IN BRAZIL

ANA GARCIA, VIRGINIA FONTES AND REJANE HOEVELER

Studies of social polarization tend to refer to a set of political party forces and affirm an interpretation of politics that limits it to formal parliamentary electoral process and institutions. While not ignoring social struggles, these analyses rarely account for the fact that a growing share of social and class struggles takes place outside the realm of electoral politics and government institutions, and that the actors involved maintain unequal relationships with the state. We call 'fictitious polarization' the false form of political contrast represented by electoral political parties portrayed as opposite poles, centred on disputes over cultural issues, which leave economic struggles to the side. Such a focus overshadows and mis-identifies the real polarizations: that of social classes, whose struggles today encompass the economic and political spheres but also social and cultural realms.

The connection between the economic and the cultural was a crucial contribution of Antonio Gramsci in his emphasis on how civil society – conceived as a space of social and class struggles – expands the state and configures itself as 'a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements' in defence of class domination. In this essay, we will focus on political behaviour, represented not only by official parties but also by other organizations and 'parties' of the Brazilian ruling classes. Based on Gramsci's writings, we analyze polarizations that are promoted by private hegemonic apparatuses (PHAs). That is, the associative entities which really are a kind of 'party' and are sponsored by the corporate bourgeoisie, and whose day-to-day work has three particular emphases – internal bourgeois organization, policy formulation and dissemination, and capitalist-philanthropic aims. These associations are not limited to 'economic' decisions, but undertake

organizational and political activities beyond the scope of the institutionalized, officially-registered parties.

WHICH POLARIZATION? THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT

We start by looking at analyses of polarization in the United States. Without delving into the complex scenario in that country, we are interested in certain features of polarization which have had important consequences for the Brazilian and Latin American contexts. Firstly, the opposition between Democratic and Republican parties is directly associated with an opposition between a liberal camp and a conservative one, and has been characterized as fundamentally asymmetric.[1] They are not equally distant from a notional political 'centre' which is, in any case, strongly defended as a kind of social ideal in American politics. The growing radicalization of the right, inside and outside the Republican party, has led social liberals and social democrats alike, as represented in the Democratic party, to take up moderate and conciliatory political and policy positions, in an attempt to preserve institutional and constitutional stability. The GOP pole, in contrast, has hardly shown any willingness to compromise. Donald Trump's election consolidated the dominance of a reactionary political discourse amongst the core of the Republican base, openly aiming to restrict civil rights on racial, ethnic and gender grounds, as well as backing any number of authoritarian policy measures. In this sense, the far right has shifted the 'centre' of an already conservative political culture.[2] The GOP, and the far right in general, has taken to dismissing compromises and adopting 'clear, non-negotiable positions',[3] notably in policy positions set against black people, migrants, indigenous peoples, LGBTQ+, feminists, and others. The party leaderships that previously ran the establishment (the traditional right and liberal democrats) still attempt to move toward an ever more elusive moderate 'centre'. But the shifting of the political terrain has provided the grounds for the legitimization of far right and even proto-fascist ideas and positions.

The radicalization of political discourse by the far right did not, however, place liberals or social democrats and the traditional right in opposite positions with regard to economic policy and projects. Nancy Fraser demonstrates that progressive and conservative political forces have together 'shielded' the neoliberal economic project. This resulted in the incorporation of sectors of the left, present in socialist, labour, and social democratic parties, into the economic and ideological agenda of neoliberalism in the 1990s and 2000s.[4] The consensus formed around the neoliberal policy regime meant that the main axis of political dispute abandoned the economic

sphere and increasingly took the form of 'culture wars'.[5] Fraser contends that the rise to political prominence of far-right leaders expressed a crisis of the hegemonic neoliberal consensus.[6] Thus, the 're-politicization' of the political environment took place on the terms of the far right, that is, an asymmetric polarization in the field of ideas and values, leaving to the side the economic sphere. Ultra-conservative in social values and ultra-liberal in economics: this equation defined, at least initially, the governments of both Trump in the US and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.[7]

Other analyses see the rise of the far right as a consequence of four decades of the implementation of neoliberalism, and particularly of the transformations it has brought about in social relations, which have fuelled popular support for proto-fascist leaders.[8] Marco Boffo, Alfredo Saad-Filho and Ben Fine observe that the 2007-08 crisis resulted, paradoxically, in the strengthening of financial institutions and neoliberal economic policies. This contributed to a widespread mistrust of the political system, which saved banks but not people, houses, and jobs, and paved the way for an 'authoritarian turn'.[9] Politics was reduced to a competition 'between shades of orthodoxy in a circumscribed political market' –[10] a fictitious polarization. In this context, many pundits and leaders on the right – and even the far right – falsely appear as political 'outsiders' in opposition to traditional elites. A vast number of workers who were victims of neoliberal globalization suddenly became the objects of a systematic campaign by proto-fascist leaders who, as is customary with this brand of authoritarian politics, put forward popular demands blaming fictitious culprits. The institutions of liberal democracy, for example, were represented by the far right as the exclusive sphere of a corrupt elite (in the Brazilian case elites linked to the left then in power at the national level) and came to be seen as such by a large share of the working classes; and social rights won through popular political struggles for public policies that addressed inequalities (such as racial and gender quota systems or social inclusion programmes) came to be presented as conferring 'undue privilege' on the affected minorities.[11]

In Brazil, the financial crisis that began in 2008 was delayed, but eventually deeply affected the middle and working classes. Under Lula da Silva's Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT) government these classes experienced citizenship through consumption, in the form of access to university, an increase in the minimum wage, and the alleviation of extreme poverty, but also increased indebtedness. Over the course of the crisis, these social strata lost these material gains in living standards and, for many, became part of a mass of workers without rights, notably in gig economy occupations like Uber drivers and delivery apps workers.[12] Faced

with the absence or unreliability of public services, significant portions of the hard-hit middle and working classes channelled their anger and resentment towards the traditional political parties, and especially against the Workers' Party. Across a wide range of social sectors, conservative values emerged and gained strength, reinforced by the actions of organized groups of the far right,[13] often linked to the growing evangelical Pentecostal churches. In this cultural milieu the far right organizes systematically through the dissemination of 'fake news', and generates a politics of 'anti-communism without communists'.

Two other characteristics of the polarization process emerge here. The first is a change in the modes of information production and circulation. The 'classical' handling of information by traditional corporate media now has to compete with social media networks where there is little control over the dissemination of lies or the 'cyber-mobbing' of opponents.[14] The second is the growing cultural force of religion, as well as the intimate relations between political and religious leaders, with Christian fundamentalism in particular adopting an aggressive, ultra-conservative and, in many cases, science-denying position. In the context of the current pandemic, these two ideological terrains have had devastating effects on the lives of populations, in conjunction with the actions of presidents such as Bolsonaro and Trump. As of August 2021, Brazil and the US had achieved notoriety for the highest total number of deaths from Covid-19, not least thanks to the right-wing political leadership helping to spread distorted and false information about vaccines, alleging obscure origins for the new coronavirus, and peddling 'miraculous' and patently useless treatments and cures.[15]

The massive demonstrations that took over the streets of Brazil in June 2013 arose out of the contradictions and consequences of the 2008-10 economic crisis. It was in this context that the increasingly heated US debate on social polarization arrived in Brazil. On the one hand, the demonstrations marked the return to the streets of demands for effective social policies, as exemplified by calls for 'FIFA standard' public services (a reference to the plans in hand for the world soccer championship due to take place in Brazil the following year). On the other hand, they also revealed the emergence of a new right, more radical and organized.[16] As Paulo Arantes has remarked, the June 2013 outbreak was a surprise, as the protests erupted in a country that had been thought to be 'pacified' by the centrist 'social pact' arrived at by Lula. Discussions about polarization in Brazil until then focused on the division between parties of different shades of social democracy – the Workers' Party and the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira – PSDB). This debate concealed fundamental

historical and policy continuities between the two in their governance of Brazil in the 1990s and 2000s under the presidencies of Fernando Henrique Cardoso of the PDSB (1995-2003), Lula da Silva (2003-10), and then Dilma Rousseff of the PT (2011-16) .[17] Despite important differences, both parties upheld three pillars of Brazilian politics: liberal macroeconomic management, modest re-distributive policies, and a politics of recognition of cultural, racial and gender rights, each regime differing in the form and degree of these policies depending on the economic situation and their permeability by social pressure. In Nunes' words, it was 'a more progressive or more conservative neoliberalism according to the occasion'.[18]

The formation of a neoliberal consensus that included the parties of social democracy in Brazil is closely associated with the activities of private hegemonic apparatuses (PHAs): the foundations and 'non-profit' associations linked to both national and international economic and financial groups. Located in civil society, they worked to 'depolarize' social life, attempting to carefully excise all organizational traces of the working classes from the formulation of policies, especially initiatives targeting the popular sectors. This strategy slowly eroded the centrality of official political parties as outlets for popular demands. The more PHAs evolved into 'quasi-parties' of the dominant elites in Brazil, the more party representation itself, in parliament and outside, lost status. Further, by directly influencing crucial policies, especially those aimed at the economy and the working youth, the PHAs eroded the principles these policies previously rested on: the notion of rights to services as part of citizenship was converted into 'access' by ability to pay or to raise funds from somewhere or other; public management was converted into the private management of the public treasury; popular participation was reduced to subaltern incorporation – without rights – in social life and, perhaps, inclusionary representation in the hegemonic apparatuses themselves. In contrast, praise for 'entrepreneurship' by both the state and the PHAs was pervasive. The word became an incantation in the media, ranging from praise of the bourgeoisie for its entrepreneurial leadership, to the conception of an education as human capital accumulation adapted to the needs of individual workers who must live their lives without any collective rights. In this ideological schema of the PHAs, the politics of parties and governments is replaced by direct capitalist management, either by the administrative norms adopted or by the privatization of state provisioning, further restricting political party representation to an electoral facade.

To a large extent, the 2013 protests were a rejection of the fictitious polarization that characterised a political process dominated in reality by

the business classes, guided by the neoliberal policy consensus since the financial crisis, and administered by PT governments. As Nunes puts it, 'by transforming the private debts of banks into sovereign debt, passing on its cost to the population in the form of cuts in services and loss of rights, right and centre-left governments had shown they defended the interests of the market above all'.[19] The re-occupation of the streets did not, however, follow a leftist path. After initial police violence against protesters, and biased and manipulative media coverage, with the mass media being itself a frequent target of the protests, an 'anti-political' sentiment emerged – with chants of 'no party' and 'no flag' – which effectively re-polarized the streets towards the right. Following a year of a polarization falsely expressed in the electoral dispute between PT and PSDB in 2014, the streets were taken over in 2015 by massive protests against corruption and the PT, which continued through 2016 and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff. If there are still debates about the nature and characteristics of the 'June Journeys' of 2013, there was no longer any doubt about the class character of the protests from 2015 onwards: they were led by the professional strata and the bourgeois classes, with support from corporations and private sources (and so did not meet police repression), and often with funding from foreign organizations.[20]

As Nunes argues, the opposition to Rousseff was, in fact, not motivated by any 'radical measures' she took, much less because she moved in a socialist direction. For Nunes, the bourgeoisie saw the conjunction of the economic crisis with the demoralization of the PT as a 'historic opportunity' to unilaterally undo the 'social pact' which had underpinned the country's re-democratisation 'without having to negotiate with the left, the social movements or the working class'. The parliamentary coup through the successful impeachment of Dilma in August 2016 was thus another expression of the 'asymmetric polarization between an opposition moving towards the right and a PT increasingly at the centre', obscuring and misdirecting the real class antagonism.[21]

What Brazil experienced was a phenomenon described by British Marxist David Renton as a 'convergence': an alliance between traditional strands of the right and an emerging extreme right.[22] The political process adopted to remove Rousseff and the PT from government without going through an election expressed a willingness on the part of the bourgeoisie (facilitated by their private apparatuses of hegemony), and the traditional conservative and neoliberal parties, to accept far-right ideas, programmes, and leaders. As Paulo Arantes put it, the 'pacification pact' sustained across the Lula era was breaking down on the right-wing side of the tacit agreement, to the point where a moderate wing of the PSDB 'declared that the doors of the party

were open to the people who demonstrated, with guns in their waistbands, their horror of the colour red'.[23] Historical examples of such 'convergence', analyzed by Renton, can be found in crucial moments since the 1950s in the United States and Britain, when traditional parties served as 'umbrellas' for far-right groups aiming to subvert the liberal democratic institutional order, rather than function as 'dikes' protecting that order by refusing to grant political credibility to such forces of instability. A similar process can be observed in Brazil in the activities of the traditional parties of the right and corporate organizations that promoted the impeachment of Rousseff and backed the subsequent election of Bolsonaro.

GRAMSCI AND BOURGEOIS PARTIES

To understand how such 'truncated polarizations' have been achieved, it is helpful to look beyond the formal political system and electoral disputes. Gramsci referred to private apparatuses of hegemony, the varied individual and groupings of civil society associative entities, as 'parties', since they had as one of their functions organizing and directing the political struggle. The term could refer both to the entities organized by the ruling classes and to those of the subaltern classes.

Analyzing post-1870 French politics, Gramsci noted that the most important initiatives did not emerge from vote-based political organizations, but from private bodies or relatively unknown offices deep inside the bureaucracy. From this he concluded that 'there was a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the state tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed'. The state served as 'just a forward trench, behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements'.[24] The awareness of a historical class struggle – a 'spirit of cleavage' – would be the necessary foundation of an effective polarization by the working class. Gramsci adds,

> What can an innovative class set against the formidable complex of trenches and fortifications of the ruling class? The spirit of cleavage – that is, the progressive acquisition of the consciousness of one's historical identity – a spirit of cleavage that must aim to extend itself from the protagonist class to the classes that are its potential allies: all of this requires complex ideological work …[25]

In *Americanism and Fordism*, Gramsci analyzed the role of the Rotary Club as an example of the particular combination of coercion and persuasion that provides the historical conditions for the emergence of a completely

'rationalized' production, which required a way of life and a social type that was adequate for it. Having analyzed various press sources about the Rotary, Gramsci wrote: 'Its basic problem seems to be the dissemination of a new capitalist spirit: in other words, the idea that industry and trade are a social *service* even prior to being a business and that, indeed, they are or could be a business insofar as they are a "service".'[26]

There is today a proliferation of foundations, institutes, and associations – all formally non-profit – which are funded and maintained by the corporate sector. Following Gramsci, these private apparatuses of hegemony express positions that go beyond immediate economic-corporate interests, and seek to build consensus, educate their own class, and act politically. Despite representing specific economic sectors, they are the setting for making compromises out of conflicts of interest within a sector or between sectors. These private apparatuses of hegemony can be found at all scales, from the local to the international, and Gramsci notably includes religious entities amongst them.

The corporate associative networks remain outside the scrutiny of the mainstream media, even while often integrated into them. This permits the participation of these PHAs in policymaking in states, often with special access to the executive but also to key offices in departments, as well as aiding the development of a ubiquitous pedagogy of capitalist domination in the media and cultural sectors that has helped to make neoliberal thought 'common sense'.

Even if formally outside the state, association members recognize their actions as political, although not partisan. They organize national interest groups and link to similar international entities, from the corporate level to broader interest groups, bringing together sectors such as manufacturing, agri-business, and development. In the case of the Trilateral Commission, created in 1973, an attempt was made to organize the international socio-economic order itself, and to rid 'overloaded' democracies of their substance (the annual Davos World Economic Forum continues in this vein).[27]

PHAs intersect and act as networks, co-participating in other associations. They prepare intellectual cadres, select and train managers and leaders to work in the state, and have an intense media presence with an intellectual profile, as seen in the activities of corporate think tanks. They often approach conservative religious groups, incorporating or funding their leadership (an important organizational role in Brazil). Some act with an international and 'philanthropic' content, such as the American-based Ford, Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Kellogg Foundations.

Some PHAs even take on a capitalist-philanthropic profile, as they claim

to assist in the mitigation of impoverishment resulting from privatization and the withdrawal of social rights. This pattern was strengthened after 1968, with the intensification of social struggles, as countless associative forms were established. While business-sector PHAs institute practices to disqualify, contain and block trade union organizations, capitalist-philanthropic PHAs develop a rhetoric about alleviating social problems, while deepening inequalities, oppression, and environmental destruction through their associated companies. In other words, while supporting certain social organizations and their 'demands' (as long as they stay clear of attacks on private property), these apparatuses seek to contain the 'spirit of cleavage', or class consciousness, and reduce the capacity for class organization.

POLARIZATION AND BOURGEOIS PARTIES IN BRAZIL

The origins of PHAs in Brazil date back to the late 19th century.[28] Until the 1960s they were mainly directed towards the defence of sectoral economic interests, organizing different bourgeois fractions and maintaining a strong presence in the state structure. The intensification of social struggles has favoured a new organizational level, through an association between the Brazilian Institute of Democratic Action (IBAD), directly financed by the US, and the Institute for Research and Social Studies (IPES), which organized a large portion of the Brazilian bourgeoisie and military personnel for the 1964 coup d'état and functioned as a headquarters.[29] Throughout the dictatorship (1964-88) strategic PHAs continued to prosper and multiply, with a strong sectoral character and easy access to the formulation of economic policies inside the state.[30]

After 1989, alongside the permanence and growth of PHAs that served the internal organization of the bourgeoisie, new entities were created in various social sectors, some with a capitalist-philanthropic character targeted at 'harm reduction' in the face of liberal policies. They were largely focused on the production of social consensus through 'concerted action' between business associations and unions or other popular sectors.[31] Their main policy target was education: by influencing public schools, public procurement, management systems, and weakening labour ties; through the training of workers without rights; and through the inclusion of 'entrepreneurship' in public school curricula, and the dissemination of a corporate pedagogy.[32] More recently, the PHAs have also educated their own cadres for parliamentary roles and lobbying.[33] Like other capitalist-philanthropic PHAs, they promote a peculiar form of 'meritocracy' – the active recruitment and training of young people from disenfranchised sectors so as to convert them into 'popular' leaders.

The number of PHAs has grown significantly in the last two decades.[34] In 2003, the accession to the presidency of Lula da Silva and the PT spurred the creation of larger and more powerful PHAs which began to make detailed proposals in many policy fields, and to monitor policy implementation.[35] PHAs also began to play an important role in the evaluation of public policies, including engaging in widespread media propaganda for a reduction in the size of the state sector, and lobbying for the adoption of the 'new public management' favouring privatization of the most diverse public resources and functions.[36] The PT, in this context, often behaved as a 'pro-capital left' by taking up the proposals of the corporate sector.[37] New administrative practices evolved in response to the PHAs' main demands. On the one hand, the PHAs demanded discipline from legislators, in the form of measures of fiscal austerity, limitations on universal policies of social security, and, above all, an increase in the ruling class's share of public resources. On the other hand, the capitalist-philanthropic PHAs proposed turning the social catastrophe these policies produced into an opportunity to transform workers stripped of social rights into 'entrepreneurs'.

Following the dismantling of party politics by the judicial-parliamentary coup of 2016 which ushered Michel Temer into the presidency, the Brazilian bourgeoisie ceded political control to far-right groups, increasingly aligned with conservative religious sectors. The PT, including Lula himself, were raised to the status of public enemies, a status magnified by the so-called 'car wash' money-laundering scandal, involving the state-owned oil company Petrobras and the leading political parties, and enflamed by the media as an indictment of the entire political system. This led to the peculiar 'polarization around a single pole' in Brazilian politics.[38] Business-sector PHAs devoted to the defence of sectoral or general capitalist interests joined in 'anti-communist' activism, while those with a 'capitalist-philanthropic' profile retained a deferential silence with respect to the state. The anti-PT discourse mutated into a visceral anti-communism completely at odds with the many pro-business and pro-capital policies that the PT had pursued, even if it had also made some concessions to the popular sectors.

In the 2018 presidential elections, Jair Bolsonaro's openly fascist, xenophobic, racist, anti-democratic behaviour led to an intense popular mobilization against his candidacy. But many PHAs supported Bolsonaro, while the corporate media portrayed the conciliatory candidacy of Fernando Haddad of the PT and former mayor of São Paulo as if they were equivalent poles of political extremism. Threats by the armed forces, militias linked to the Bolsonaro family, and the Pentecostal churches allied with Bolsonaro's social conservatism intensified this new polarization. Indeed, the anti-

communism that had animated a resurgent hard right in Brazil became co-joined with a concerted attack by historical far-right forces against bourgeois institutions – including representative institutions – with the complicity and support of the business sector.[39]

Once in government, Bolsonaro fulfilled his promise to dismantle many of the popular and cultural achievements that were the progressive legacy of the PT, and he has remained dogged in pursuing this destructive agenda. His ultra-neoliberal economic policy regime, including direct assaults on the working classes through minimum wage cuts and labour legislation rollbacks, has secured support from the business sector, although they have limited options in any case.

There are, however, contradictions in Bolsonaro's political agenda. His attacks – including economic attacks – against the country's largest corporate media have helped him maintain the loyalty of his most radical right-wing bases. But the constant anti-media barrage has also opened fissures within the business sector, especially as the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated his profound inability to provide any of the necessary verbal guidance needed to manage an emergency situation.[40] The inept handling of the pandemic response has meant that opposition to Bolsonaro has been growing even within right-wing parties, as illustrated by the recent 'impeachment super request' which unified parties from different camps.[41] In addition, a parliamentary commission of inquiry is currently underway in the Brazilian Senate with the aim of investigating the health policies of Bolsonaro's government in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. These developments have been undercutting, to some degree, Bolsonaro's framework of parliamentary alliances and support.

However, there remains no major disagreement amongst the social forces on the right with respect to the economic policies of the government. The corporate media groups at odds with Bolsonaro criticize his health policy and pandemic management but not his economic programme.[42] A few capitalist-philanthropic PHAs keep some distance from the most belligerent 'Bolsonarist' practices. But there has been no substantive break with Bolsonaro in the political positioning of the most important PHAs devoted to internal bourgeois organization, including the most important one, the Federation of Industries of the State of São Paulo (FIESP).

Could there be a new polarization, of a quite different kind, initiated by the left in Brazil? The fascist discourse and practices of the Bolsonaro's government have led the small left-wing parties, and the more combative sections of the PT, as well as many social movements, to include self-defence as part of their organizational arsenal, since they have been subject to direct

attacks. So far, all mobilizations against Bolsonaro have come from anti-fascist groups and various social movements, many of them gathered in two large fronts – *Frente Brasil Popular* and *Frente Povo Sem Medo* (People Without Fear) – each including combative leftist groups and a small portion of the cadres of the institutionalized left-wing parties. Their organizational expression on a national scale is small but growing, despite the restraints imposed by the pandemic. The central issue for these fronts is the fight against the government's genocidal policies, and 'Fora Bolsonaro' (Out with Bolsonaro).[43] Although they are united in anti-fascist struggle, there remains a strategic bifurcation in the fronts. Some defend a broad front that would include all social and bourgeois sectors that oppose Bolsonaro, given the urgency of the pandemic and the ongoing socio-environmental devastation (not least of the Amazon) – a perspective that tends to minimize the character of the class polarization cutting across Brazilian society. Others support a united front with an explicit class profile, aggregating anti-capitalist forces and popular parties and movements, with a more organizational emphasis – the focus being on forcing, Bolsonaro out of office, or even overthrowing him.

The legal turnaround by the Brazilian Supreme Court in April 2021 that allowed Lula to be the PT candidate in the next presidential election has led to the re-emergence of the term 'polarization', particularly invoked again by the large corporate media. This reactivates the old notion of an electoral polarization between Lula and Bolsonaro which had previously been pushed to the side by the 'car-wash' scandal. But the retrieval now carries a dramatic significance, since defeating Bolsonaro – and his fascistic politics – is a fundamental condition for the survival of Brazilian democracy.

The 'spirit of cleavage', as Gramsci would say, or an effective class polarization, still seems far off in Brazil. The anti-fascist struggle opens up the possibility for a reconstitution of class politics, especially since anti-fascist demonstrations for Bolsonaro's impeachment, and for 'vaccines in the arm and food on the plate', may become the source of an effective left-wing front that aggregates multiple struggles, and is able to confront the power wielded by the capitalist classes through their varied apparatuses of hegemony.

POLARIZATION AND THE FAR RIGHT IN LATIN AMERICA

What are some of the expressions of polarization found in other Latin American scenarios? The region is currently the scene of intense social struggles and the emergence of new political actors. A suggestive expression formulated by Maristela Svampa, which is not unlike the use here of the concept of fictious polarization, is 'toxic polarization'.[44] She refers to the

polarization between, on the one hand, the 'old progressivism', personified by former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, and consisting of self-proclaimed socialist sectors, businessmen, and even social conservative groups, giving rise to a contradictory 'conservative progressivism'; and, on the other hand, the more reactionary and 'ultra-liberal right'. The struggle between them concerns the rhythm and intensity of capitalist exploitation, present in both programmes, and the admission of a larger or smaller range of subaltern and indigenous partners into the progressive pole, most of whom are ideologically excluded by the reactionary right.

At the outset of Latin America's so-called 'pink tide' challenge to neoliberalism in the early 2000s, Ecuador and Bolivia drew up innovative political constitutions whose corollary was the expansion of rights, with great popular participation. Amidst the commodities boom, these governments consolidated popular leadership and an electoral base responding to economic growth and poverty reduction, through strategies adopted to each local context. In each case, the growth and redistribution strategy pivoted on the expansion of extractive activities in the mining and oil industries, benefiting from high prices in the international market driven by Chinese demand.

According to Svampa, this led to contradictions and clashes with indigenous and environmental movements that promoted a plurinational state, defended the rights of nature, and sought alternatives to extractivism. Correa's government reacted to these socio-environmental conflicts with the criminalization and judicialization of social movements, as well as the removal of the legal status of foreign NGOs, and their expulsion. For Svampa, Ecuador became not only an 'extractivist state', but also an anti-indigenous and authoritarian government 'with unmistakable patriarchal traits and practices'.[45] This fuelled growing opposition forces ideologically oriented to Correa's left, especially among indigenous movements, which promoted Yaku Perez's losing presidential candidacy for the eco-socialist Pachakutik party in 2021.[46]

Thus, the 2021 electoral context in Ecuador revealed a struggle between three main social forces. The first two were a more statist 'progressive' force, and the 'ultra-liberal' right against which it was polarized, although both were socially conservative (against abortion, for instance) and supported various forms of 'developmentalism' and promoted the expansion of capitalism, at different intensities and in different ways. The third force is popular, autonomously organized, anti-development, and anti-capitalist (if in quite distinct forms), and it struggles against the other two forces. This framing design could be extended to other countries, with some adjustments, assuming that the countless disputes loosely-designated as 'identity struggles'

configure as part of a third force alongside revolutionary left-wing parties which have importance but limited social and political expression. For Svampa, the previous election in Ecuador in 2017 had already led to 'extreme and indefensible' positions, leaving such deep political wounds that, for an important sections of the indigenous movement, Correa was no longer considered a progressive, or leftist, much less a socialist politician.[47] The result of this difficult Ecuadorian context was the victory in May 2021 of the neoliberal right pole, led by Guillermo Lasso and his revealingly-named 'Creating Opportunities' party (Creando Oportunidades).

The Latin American scenario adds complexity to the asymmetric polarization process discussed earlier and to the division between a more progressive neoliberalism and a more conservative one. Some of the 'progressive' Latin American leaders hold more conservative positions in relation to social values, especially when it comes to gender issues and abortion rights.[48] Svampa notes that Correa's government dismantled a family planning and teenage pregnancy prevention programme guided by public health criteria, even going so far as to place it under the control of people associated with the ultra-conservative Catholic organization Opus Dei.

The proto-fascist far right that emerged in Brazil has found peers in the rest of Latin America. The crucial year is 2015, when a populist hard right returned to the streets in protests and began taking power in a series of elections across Latin America in a 'conservative wave', in direct reaction to the 'pink tide'. Argentina saw the arrival at the presidency in November 2015 of the right-wing coalition led by Mauricio Macri, now called *Juntos por el Cambio* (Together for Change), after twelve years of governments headed by Néstor Kirchner and then Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Macri was not elected, however, on a platform of polarizing the electorate; on the contrary, in the middle of the electoral race Macri declared himself a Peronist. Even though the right-wing opposition to the Kirchner governments was far from weak, and was able to launch a (failed) corruption investigation against Cristina Kirchner, until recently there were no political forces that clearly identified as far-right movements. Amid the rise of the so-called 'new right' on the continent, Cristina Kirchner's return as vice-president, in the 2019 election that brought the left-leaning Alberto Fernández to the presidency, was the political fact that awakened an actual far right in Argentina.[49]

In Chile, there was no fundamental rupture with the far right in state institutions after the Pinochet dictatorship (with Pinochet becoming a senator for life) or the neoliberal policies the far right had mandated. For instance, the cadres of UDI (*Unión Demócrata Independiente*, the party founded

in 1983 by Jaime Guzmán and the architect of the 1980 Constitution that is now being overturned) remained in powerful positions even during the *Concertación* (coalition of parties for democracy) governments of the centre-left in power from 1990-2010. The Chilean far right, through the candidacy of José Antonio Kast, obtained a significant number of votes in the elections that returned businessman and former president Sebastián Piñera to power in 2018. The social mobilizations (*estallido*) that took to the streets of Santiago in October 2019 were directed against both the legacy of Pinochet's dictatorship and the enduring neoliberal policy regime. The defenders of the former dictator, however, did not watch in silence. In addition to the brutal state violence that led to the death of over thirty young people, and blinded hundreds of others, there was also 'private violence' by the far right through attacks, death threats, and so on. For instance, during campaigns for the Plebiscite on the Constitution, held in October 2020, weapons were found in bunkers linked to the 'no' campaign opposed to the formation of a new constituent assembly. The discourse of the 'no' campaign was representative of a broad sector of the Chilean ruling classes, pressuring President Piñera, who had always politically condemned the past dictatorship, to offer a series of nods and concessions – what Renton refers to as 'convergence' – to the far right in the rest of his term. In a deeply symbolic gesture, Piñera appointed to the Ministry of Education a great-niece of Pinochet, who would soon defend a ban on 'gender ideology teaching'.[50]

In contrast to Brazil, in neither Argentina nor Chile has the cult of the dictatorial past become as widespread or as much part of the common sense. It has been much more difficult for the far right in these countries to maintain a symbolic and even intimate connection to the violent dictatorial regimes of their past as explicitly as Bolsonaro does in Brazil. Still, the hard right in Latin America is increasingly open about their anti-democratic instincts. For example, the former Argentine president Eduardo Duhalde spoke in August 2020 (just eight months after Alberto Fernández's inauguration as president) of the supposed 'need' for a coup d'état.[51]

If we can see a political renewal of the radical right in Latin America from 2015, the big corporate media in Latin American countries also started to give more space around that time to an 'intellectual renewal' of the far right through such figures as Agustín Laje (Fundación Libre) and Javier Milei in Argentina; Axel Kaiser in Chile; and Gloria Alvarez (Atlas Foundation) in Guatemala. The 1996 bestseller, *Manual del perfecto idiota latinoamericano* (*Guide to the Perfect Latin American Idiot*) by Álvaro Vargas Llosa, Carlos Alberto Montaner and Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, had already begun to lay a foundation for a cultural resurgence of a radical right. And the more recent

2016 missive, *El libro negro de la nueva izquierda: Ideología de género o subversión cultural* (*The Black Book of the New Left: Gender Ideology or Cultural Subversion*') by Agustín Laje and Nicolás Márquez, was equally fundamental in spreading this new right agenda across the region, as was the pervasive presence of all these authors in social media. In this way, a leader like Macri could take office in Argentina as a 'pragmatic' neoliberal, but be pushed further to the right by other social forces that were building a base for the radical right – and themselves – on the terrain of so-called 'culture wars' against anything that might refer to liberal and leftist agendas.

In this respect, the influence exerted in Latin America by the far-right Spanish party Vox is also noteworthy in setting up the broad left as the target for the radical right. By founding the 'Anti-Foro de São Paulo' (the conference of leftist political parties across South America initiated by the PT in 1990) in Madrid the party, led by Francoist and neo-fascist deputy Santiago Abascal, has managed to bring together different expressions of the Latin American radical right.[52]

IN THE FACE OF THE PANDEMIC

The legacy of asymmetric polarization in the Brazilian party system, and the fictious polarizations successfully pursued by the far right, have been brought into sharp relief by the arrival of the pandemic. Faced with a devastating loss of more than 500,000 lives in Brazil from Covid-19, the result of the genocidal policy promoted by Jair Bolsonaro's government, the social problems and grotesque inequalities of Brazil have become even more dire. By the end of 2020 the most elementary degree of poverty – hunger – was experienced by fifty-eight million people (27.7 per cent of the population) in Brazil.[53] In addition, while unemployment reached 15 per cent of the population, the pandemic has raised the proportion of the adult population that work via digital platforms (such as Uber drivers, food delivery workers, and personal caregivers) in Brazil to 20 per cent.[54]

The situation is even more serious for women: thirteen million women lost their jobs in Latin America during the pandemic, today amounting to twenty-five million unemployed women in the region.[55] At the same time, the number of Latin American billionaires has increased by 40 per cent during the pandemic.[56] Sixty-five Brazilian billionaires are on Forbes Magazine's list – twenty of whom have been bumped on to it during the pandemic.[57] This is the *true polarization* that is at the centre of Brazilian, and indeed Latin American, capitalism. It is the setting in which social struggles will need to be rebuilt to face the economic and social wreckage aggravated by the pandemic.

To confront the emergence of a far right with its proto-fascist elements, it is essential to recompose the organizational forms of anti-capitalist struggles. These forms are being renewed by anti-racist, feminist, indigenous, LGBTQ+ struggles, as well as by anti-fascist and anti-imperialist struggles. But they need to maintain, above all, their working-class 'spirit of cleavage', that is, their anti-capitalist character.

NOTES

1 Rodrigo Nunes, 'Todo lado tem dois lados', *Revista Serrote*, 16 June 2020, available at: www.revistaserrote.com.br.
2 Nunes, 'Todo lado tem dois lados'.
3 Paulo Arantes, 'Entre destroços do presente' (entrevista), *Blog da Boitempo*, 10 April 2015, available at: blogdaboitempo.com.br.
4 Nancy Fraser, 'From progressive neoliberalism to Trump and beyond', *American Affairs*, 1(4), 2017.
5 Nunes, 'Todo lado tem dois lados'.
6 Nancy Fraser, 'From progressive neoliberalism to Trump and beyond'.
7 According to Paulo Arantes, 'the new right ended up leading a wave of re-politicization, in its own terms, of course, but no less real, by reintroducing the enemy into the crony game of current political affairs'. And for Rodrigo Nunes, with the economy 'shielded' by the neoliberal consensus, the polarized dispute of politics – and therefore, its 're-politicization' – took place in the field of culture, in what came to be called 'cultural wars'. See Paulo Arantes, 'Entre destroços do presente'; and Rodrigo Nunes, 'Todo lado tem dois lados'.
8 See Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: on Neoliberal Society,* London: Verso, 2017; Wendy Brown. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019; Marco Boffo, Alfred Saad-Filho, and Ben Fine, 'Neoliberal Capitalism: The Authoritarian Turn', in Leo Panitch and Greg Albo eds, *Socialist Register 2019: A World Turned Upside Down?* London: Merlin Press, 2018.
9 Boffo, et al, 'Neoliberal capitalism: the authoritarian turn'.
10 'Neoliberal capitalism: the authoritarian turn', p. 257.
11 'Neoliberal capitalism: the authoritarian turn', p. 259.
12 The informality rate in Brazil rose from 32.5 per cent in 2012 (when the crisis effectively took hold in the country) to 41.6 per cent in 2019. Brazilian sociologists Ruy Braga and Ricardo Antunes have produced extensive research on struggles of 'uberized' workers in Brazil and elsewhere, discussing both contemporary labor relations and the new struggle of precarized workers, or 'Infoproletarians'. See 'IBGE: informalidade atinge 41,6% dos trabalhadores no país em 201', *Agência Brasil,* 20 November 2020; Ricardo Antunes and Vitor Filgueiras, 'Plataformas digitais, uberização do trabalho e regulação no capitalismo contemporâneo', *Contracampo*, 39(1), 2020; and Ruy Braga and Ricardo Antunes, *Infoproletários: degradação real do trabalho virtual*, São Paulo: Boitempo, 2009.
13 The growth of these groups was, to a large extent, encouraged by organizations of the Brazilian bourgeoisie. The Federation of Industries of the State of São Paulo (FIESP),

for instance, carried out a campaign for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff using a yellow duck as a symbol, which became a reference for right-wing protests. See:. 'Empresários redobram pressão contra Governo Dilma e cobram apoio do Congresso', *El País*, 16 March 2016.

14 According to Nunes, 'the journalistic reflex of "telling both sides of the story", even when the statements of one side have no basis in reality, makes vehicles help manipulators in the creation of a false appearance of symmetry, which is instrumental for those who feed on polarization. Thus, the debunking and apologies of controversial characters will never receive as many shares as the impact headlines in their speeches.' Nunes, 'Todo lado tem dois lados'.

15 A study published by researchers from several areas, including a renowned group from the Paulista School of Medicine at USP, has demonstrated how Jair Bolsonaro's actions have resulted in the spread the new coronavirus. These included: vetoes of state laws on the mandatory use of masks; authorization for churches and temples to operate unrestricted; the inclusion of sectors such as gyms and beauty salons as 'essential' activities; and the distribution, especially among indigenous peoples, of hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin, and other drugs proven ineffective in combating Covid-19. This study supports the work of the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission currently underway in the Brazilian Senate. Together with other research, they have served as the basis for four petitions to investigate Bolsonaro filed at the International Criminal Court in the Hague. See: Deisy de Freitas Lima Ventura and Rosana Reis, 'A linha do tempo da estratégia federal de disseminação da covid-19', *Direitos na pandemia: mapeamento e análise das normas jurídicas de resposta à Covid-19 no Brasil*, 10, São Paulo, 2021, pp. 6-31.

16 Nunes, 'Todo lado tem dois lados'.

17 Arantes, 'Entre destroços do presente'.

18 Nunes, 'Todo lado tem dois lados'.

19 Nunes, 'Todo lado tem dois lados'.

20 There were allegations of obscure funding coming from the Koch family in the US to far-right groups in Brazil and Latin America. See: Carolina Schiavon and Katya Braghini, 'Os irmãos Koch miram a América Latina', *Outras Palavras*, 24 Agosto 2020; and 'Irmãos Koch, os donos do mundo, *El País*, 23 September 2019.

21 Nunes, 'Todo lado tem dois lados'.

22 David Renton. *The New Authoritarians: Convergence on the Right*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019.

23 Arantes, 'Entre destroços do presente'.

24 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 3, translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, Q7 § 16, p. 169.

25 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, Q3 § 49, p. 53.

26 *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, Q 5 §2, p. 269. The Rotary Club is a US-based decentralized association of business and professional leaders undertaking charitable service.

27 Rejane Carolina Hoeveler, *As elites orgânicas transnacionais diante da crise: os primórdios da Comissão Trilateral (1973-1979),* Niterói: UFF, Masters' Thesis, 2015, pp. 92-173.

28 Sonia Regina de Mendonça, *O ruralismo brasileiro*, São Paulo: Hucitec, 1997.

29 René Armand Dreifuss, 1*964: a conquista do Estado. Ação política, poder e golpe de classe*, 5. ed., Petrópolis: Vozes, 1987; and Elaine de Almeida Bortone, *O Instituto de Pesquisas e Estudos Sociais (IPES) e a ditadura empresarial-militar: os casos das empresas estatais federais e*

da indústria farmacêutica (1964-1967), Rio de Janeiro: UFRJ, Doctoral Thesis in History, 2018.

30 It was particularly the case of associative entities linked to engineering and construction companies. See: Pedro Henrique Pedreira Campos, *Estranhas Catedrais*, Niteroi: EDUFF, 2017.

31 Flavio Henrique Calheiros Casimiro, *A nova direita – aparelhos de ação política e ideológica no Brasil contemporâneo*, São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2018.

32 André Silva Martins, *A direita para o social: a educação da sociabilidade no Brasil contemporâneo*, Juiz de Fora: Editora UFJF, 2009.

33 For example, the *Líderes do Amanhã* program, offered by the *Instituto de Estudos Empresariais-Forum da Liberdad*e in association with US-based organizations such as the Atlas Institute, is focused on the training of heirs. More recent initiatives include: *Politize!* (led by 'young entrepreneurs'); *RenovaBR* (founded by a financial sector entrepreneur who works in education); the *RAPS-Rede de Ação Política Pela Sustentabilidade* (created by one of the owners of the Brazilian multinational corporation Natura); and several programs carried out by the Lemann Foundation (co-owner of several companies, including AB InBEV). All have aimed to form 'leaders that promote social impact'. See: Lísia Nicoliello Cariello, *Construindo redes de intelectuais orgânicos*: *o Programa de Bolsas de Estudos Lemann Fellowship da Fundação Lemann (2007-2018)*, Niterói: UFF, Masters Thesis in History, 2021.

34 From 105,000 in 1996 to 276,000 in 2002, and in 2018 reaching 820,000 entities. See: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), *As Fundações Privadas e Associações sem Fins Lucrativos no Brasil 2005*, Estudos e Pesquisas de Informação Econômica 8, Rio de Janeiro: IBGE, 2008; IBGE, *As Fundações Privadas e Associações sem Fins Lucrativos no Brasil 2010*, Rio de Janeiro: IBGE, 2012; and Felix Garcia Lopez, Org., *Perfil das organizações da sociedade civil no Brasil*, Brasília: IPEA, 2018.

35 André Pereira Guiot. *Dominação burguesa no Brasil: estado e sociedade civil no Conselho de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social (CDES) entre 2003 e 2010*, Niterói: UFF, Doctoral Thesis in History, 2015.

36 For examples: *Todos pela Educação* (formulation, control, evaluation and implementation of basic educational policies shaped by the business sector); *Movimento pela Base* (formulation and implementation of new curriculum for public schools with a capital-led pedagogical structure); *COMUNITAS* (contracts with municipalities and state governments to monitor the integral management process of public entities); *Movimento Brasil Competitivo* (partnership with the federal government to 'modernize' public management centered on managerial models). See: Nivea Silva Vieira and Rodrigo Lamosa, *Todos pela Educação? Uma Década De Ofensiva Do Capital Sobre As Escolas Públicas*, Appris: Curitiba, 2020; and Anderson Tavares, *Transformações no aparelho de Estado e dominação burguesa no Brasil (1990-2010)*, Niterói: UFF, Doctoral Thesis in History, 2020.

37 Eurelino Teixeira Coelho Neto, *Uma esquerda para o capital – o transformismo dos grupos dirigentes do PT (1979-1998)*, São Paulo: Xamã, 2012.

38 Anticommunism in Brazil is constitutive, and in practice constitutes, a deep repulsion to any popular democratic participation and to forms of popular nationalism. The only pole – anti-communism – did not confront revolutionary organizations.

39 A masterful study that analyzes the network of intersections between the Brazilian and international far rights, the American CIA, and various Brazilian state agencies between

1936 and 1964 is: Vicente Gil da Silva, *Planejamento e organização da contrarrevolução preventiva no Brasil: atores e articulações transnacionais (1936-1964)*, Rio de Janeiro: UFRJ, Doctoral Thesis in History, 2020.

40 Recently, an editorial of one of the largest corporate media newspapers in Brazil wrote: 'No more blackmail. The Nation can no longer stand blackmail. Enough with the threats to Republican institutions and to the democratic regime that Brazilians have recovered through great sacrifice. It is time for courage and determination in defence of freedom. President Jair Bolsonaro no longer meets the conditions to remain in office.' Antonio Carlos Pereira, 'Chega de chantagem', *O Estado de São Paulo*, 7 November 2021.

41 'Super pedido de impeachment de Bolsonaro: quais os 23 crimes de responsabilidade listados no documento', *BBC Brasil*, 1 July 2021.

42 The Globo TV network and corporate national newspapers have come to oppose Jair Bolsonaro's government for the criminal neglect of the pandemic. Yet, the same media support the government's liberal economic policy, including fiscal austerity, pension reform, and ongoing privatizations. Such media also integrate and promote PHAs in various fields, such as education, agri-business, and social sectors.

43 Bolsonaro is being accused of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in the Hague for the criminal mismanagement of the pandemic. There was already an accusation, presented at the Hague court in 2019, for human rights violations committed against indigenous peoples during his first year in government. See: 'Ação contra Bolsonaro avança em Haia, e indígenas vão denuncia-lo por genocídio e por ecocídio', *El País,* 30 June 2021.

44 Maristela Svampa. 'Yaku Perez y otra izquierda posible', *El DiarioAR*, 8 February 2021, available at: www.eldiarioar.com

45 Svampa 'Yaku Perez y otra izquierda posible'.

46 'Yaku Perez y otra izquierda posible'.

47 'Yaku Perez y otra izquierda posible'.

48 Paul Angelo and Will Freedman, 'A socially conservative left is gaining traction in Latin America', *Americas Quarterly*, 23 June 2021. The article expresses a US liberal vision that we do not share, but it synthesizes conservative positions in terms of gender and LGBTQ+ rights among progressive leaders on the continent and praises, in turn, those leaders that were closest to the US, in countries such as Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia, or Lula's Brazil, for liberal positions in this regard.

49 Pablo Stefanoni, ¿La rebeldía se volvió de derecha? Cómo el antiprogresismo y la anticorrección política están construyendo um nuevo sentido común (y por qué la izquierda debería tomarlos en serio*)*, Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinteuno, 2021.

50 'Piñera nombra a sobrina nieta de Pinochet a cargo del Ministerio de la Mujer', *El Mostrador*, 5 May 2020.

51 'Eduardo Duhalde: La Argentina puede tener um golpe de Estado', *La Nación*, 25 August 2020.

52 'O VOX aterrissa na América Latina', *Revista Ópera*, 7 June 2021.

53 'Fome no Brasil cresce e supera taxa de quando Bolsa Família foi criado', *Deutsche Welle Brasil*, 13 April 2021.

54 'Do WhatsApp ao Uber: 1 em cada 5 trabalhadores usa apps para ter renda', *UOL Economia*, 12 May 2021.

55 'OIT: Covid deixou 13 milhões de mulheres da América Latina sem emprego', *UOL Economia*, 3 March 2021.

56 A mere 107 people have accumulated US$ 408 billion in assets in Latin America and the Caribbean. See: 'Número de bilionários latino-americanos aumenta 40% durante a pandemia de coronavírus', *El País*, 28 May 2021.

57 'Lista de bilionários da Forbes ganha 20 brasileiros e tem crescimento recorde na pandemia', *BBC Brasil*, 7 April 2021.