

'The attempted coups in the United States and Brazil are the early stage of an international neo-fascism'

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The correspondence between the attack on Brazilian government buildings and the events on Capitol Hill two years ago is striking. For sociologist Ugo Palheta, who recently published *La Nouvelle Internationale fasciste* (Textuel, 2022) and hosts the monthly podcast *Minuit dans le siècle*, these are clear signs of an extreme right that is organising itself globally, in both theories and practices.

Samuel Lacroix - How do you read the attack on Brazilian government buildings by the Bolsonarists, which came almost two years to the day after the attack on the Capitol by Trump supporters and with striking correspondences?

Ugo Palheta -This attack was absolutely predictable and the entire Brazilian left had been warning for months that Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters would not stand idly by if Lula won. Not only was this far-right factional mobilisation preceded by numerous actions by Bolsonarist activists aimed at contesting the result of the election (roadblocks on strategic axes, encampments in front of barracks to call the military into action, etc.). But also because Bolsonaro had not ceased, for at least a year and a half, working to mobilise his supporters against the institutions (in particular the Supreme Court), publicly stating on numerous occasions, like Trump in the US context, that the election would be rigged, that his victory would be stolen, etc. He even claimed that the 2018 election could have been rigged and that he had likely won in the first round. So, the groundwork had been laid for an action of this type well in advance, at the highest level of the state, even if Bolsonaro was careful not to make explicit calls for insurrection.

Were there not also differences between these two events? For example, Bolsonaro is more cautious and has disassociated himself from the activists to a greater extent than Trump, who had encouraged his supporters and even instigated the attempted coup.

Despite this, Bolsonaro had far more support in the military than Trump. After all, his government included several high-ranking military officers, and he had brought many officers into the ministries. But both the army staff and Bolsonaro knew that the US - as well as China and all the major powers - was violently opposed to a coup. Embarking on such an initiative would have been an adventure without a future, and Bolsonaro would also have risked being convicted of sedition. A minimum of strategic sense implies that he should bide his time, bearing in mind four elements: his party obtained excellent results in the parliamentary elections that were also held last October; his personal result in the second round (49.1%) was much higher than the polls had been indicating for months; he has been able to use his position to build up a militant base over the last four years,

capable of taking action in the streets, threatening his left-wing opponents and sufficiently confident to storm the country's main political institutions; and finally, Lula risks being blocked in his political initiatives because of the very heterogeneous character of the coalition that brought him to power. All this means that we are by no means finished with Bolsonaro and, even less so, with what Bolsonarism is, namely the main Brazilian variety of neo-fascism.

There are, of course, correspondences between these attempted coups. I should note here that the fact that they both failed miserably, also that they had almost comical stylistic aspects (such as the conspiratorial shaman who wandered the corridors of the Capitol with his raccoon skin and buffalo horns), should not lead us to underestimate their significance. They are symptoms of a neo-fascist movement that is coagulating on an international scale, taking singular forms according to national contexts of course, but, currently, at an early stage of development. Hence its weak strategic sense, if not close to zero, because you can't carry out a coup d'état with a few thousand people, while lacking both a project and support from the main state apparatus. The other correspondence is that we see in these movements – to which we should add the attempted invasion of the Bundestag in Germany in 2020 and the ransacking of the premises of the main Italian trade union, the CGIL, in 2021, after demonstrators had failed to take over the palace of government – a junction between radical reactionary currents, neo-fascist organisations, and ordinary people who are not militants and generally belong to the middle classes.

Can you specify the contours of such an International? Does it express itself in common practices? A common ideology? In one particular place, or everywhere? You mention countries like India and Turkey. Is there a 'BRICS effect'?

We can start with what this International is not. It is not a structured organisation with a central leadership, ideologically homogeneous and capable of taking action on command. But the idea of an International allows us to emphasise the global character of the political wave that is currently growing, the circulation, import and translation of words, pseudo-theories or neo-fascist affects (such as the 'great replacement' for example), and the transnational activism of certain actors, whether ideologists, think tanks, foundations or intellectual networks (the most famous is certainly Steve Bannon, but the French *Nouvelle Droite* has long had links with reactionary ideologists in many countries), or even certain patrons. It does not have a common programme, let alone a shared doctrine – but neither did classical fascism, as the great historian of fascism Robert Paxton makes clear. However, there is a broadly common ideology, even if each variety – even within the same country – offers a particular synthesis of major elements, revolving essentially around the hatred of equality (and therefore of all movements that bear the demand for equality: the various lefts, the unions, the feminist, anti-racist and LGBTQI+ movements). In terms of practices, we see everywhere the interaction – which does not necessarily imply organised coordination – between an institutionally oriented branch, parties constituting electoral showcases or leaders seeking to conquer power by legal means (Trump and Bolsonaro), and a violent, street-based branch, which aspires to violently punish the 'traitors to the nation', the 'anti-national elements'.

Is 'fascist' the right term? Why not 'populist' or 'extreme right', to use more commonly used terms?

'Populist' says nothing about the politics that are proposed by these movements and almost always leads to the amalgamation of movements that are opposed in almost every respect: Le Pen and Mélenchon, Trump and Sanders, Vox and Podemos, etc. Fascist or neo-fascist movements are 'populist', obviously, but they have no monopoly on 'populism'. Historically, there has been neoliberal populism (Thatcher or Reagan, for example, but also in a way Macron), and communist discourse often had populist features, as have many politically heterogeneous Latin American movements (from Peronism to Chavismo), not to mention historical populisms (Russian or

American). 'Extreme right' is a better category, in my opinion, but it has the defect of being purely 'geographical' (to the right of the traditional right) and therefore of saying nothing about political content. If anything, the terms 'nationalist' or 'reactionary' are closer to reality, but the former seems to me to miss the violence of most far-right movements today, while the latter does not capture the more complex character of these movements, which are generally both modernising and reactionary (as was historical fascism). We are witnessing the birth of a new fascism, a fascism that is incomplete at this stage (especially in its ability to mobilise the masses), but is tailored to the new economic and political conditions, as well as social and cultural conditions, or emotional, if you like: a post-Fordist fascism, taking advantage of new modes of politicisation (in particular via social networks), and dreaming less of a radiant future than of a return to an obviously mythologised golden age, aspiring less to conquer the world at the expense of competing powers than to impose a closed world at the expense of groups perceived as 'enemies within' (foreigners, immigrants, minorities).

In your book, you take up the distinction established by Antonio Gramsci between a 'war of position', consisting in particular of the gradual infusion of far-right ideas and theories, and a 'war of movement' taking the form of more or less violent action. Do the two assaults we are talking about, despite being largely confined to symbolic violence, mark the transition to a new war of movement?

Yes, I think so, but this was clearly a strategic error. The transition to violence could not lead to victory, at least in the two cases mentioned here. However, we must take the measure of actions that would have seemed unimaginable only twenty years ago, and that are sadly more a dress rehearsal than a swan song: neo-fascist movements have crystallised that are sufficiently confident in their strength to launch an armed assault on political institutions. It is true that at this stage the far right is far more likely to practice positional warfare, and most, if not all, of the major far-right leaders continue to distance themselves from these initiatives. But for how long? Liberal democracies are increasingly perceived as illegitimate, and for good reason: the living conditions of the majority of the population are deteriorating; state repression, both police and judicial, is becoming more ferocious everywhere in the face of social mobilisation; past conquests - public services, social protection, labour law - continue to be dismantled via marketisation policies. Fuelled by these neoliberal policies, we are witnessing a rise in competition, precariousness and fears of social decline, which is one of the most powerful engines of racism and neo-fascism. Without a political alternative to neoliberalism, it is therefore highly unlikely that the fascist International will retreat. Beyond proclamations of democracy, this is the task that needs to be tackled.

Interview by Samuel Lacroix

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P.S.

• Verso. Blog. 20 February 2023:
<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5562-the-attempted-coups-in-the-united-states-and-brazil-are-the-early-stage-of-an-international-neo-fascism>

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• **Translated by David Fernbach**