

Hatred and Fear: Bolsonaro and the Return of Irrational Politics

Written by Rafael R. Ioris and Andre Pagliarini

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/07/29/hatred-and-fear-bolsonaro-and-the-return-of-irrational-politics/>

RAFAEL R. IORIS AND ANDRE PAGLIARINI, JUL 29 2019

Modern democratic politics is grounded on notions of rationality and fact-based exchange between opponents. From the liberal parliamentarianism of, most notably, the United Kingdom to the union-based progressivism that reshaped politics in the United States and elsewhere in the 19th century, more or less restrictive processes of deliberation were designed to function by appealing to wider constituencies willing to be convinced of the merits of competing policy proposals, ideological formulations, or utopian horizons. Though violence, superstition, and emotion were never fully eliminated from the political realm, the expansion of political participation from the late 1800s onwards rested on the belief that alternative political projects could be assessed by an active, self-interested citizenry willing to compromise in order to advance their agendas and goals.

Much in the same way, despite the brutality of ideological violence experienced in the 20th century, which vividly illustrated the difficulty of attaining the aforementioned ideals, Western democratic systems posited that individuals could act rationally, replacing overt violence with a path of discursive negotiations perceived as a surer path to fulfilling their material interests. Despite being foundational to all forms of democratic models, liberal forms of politics – defined at the very least by political pluralism, the free exchange of ideas, and the peaceful transfer of power – today face dramatic crises on a global scale. In effect, the gradual erosion of democratic institutions in many of the largest countries today seems to indicate perhaps the first time when, rather than frontal attacks on democratic values (like those carried out by fascists in the 1930s), liberal means have been appropriated to subvert the liberal logic.

Rather than fortuitously expanding the public sphere, the ability of citizens to broadly disseminate information, especially through social media, is becoming a means of fostering hatred and fear and to deepen ethnoreligious divisions. The result is fertile ground for the ignorance and anti-intellectualism reshaping politics around the world. These trends have been clearly demonstrated in the recent reelection of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India who, despite failing to deliver on key campaign promises (e.g. employment and high rates of growth), managed to win by fostering the image of an internal enemy (non-Hindu minorities) as a way to harness support among his ever more fearful supporters. Adding to this picture, the on-going unraveling of British politics, the birthplace of the parliamentary model, can be traced back to the scare tactics of a furtive campaign targeting parties who would still propose fact-based debates in the public sphere.

The coarseness of the otherwise legitimate debate over whether or not to leave the European Union despite the benefits the country has accrued from its participation in continental politics starkly denotes that politics today, though still democratic in a formal sense (i.e. majority vote), rests on fear. What is more, while not new in the United States, where Richard Nixon tapped into the political power of a “silent majority” in the early 1970s, there has been a spike of anti-intellectualism dressed up as anti-establishment sentiment. Donald Trump epitomizes this aversion to reasonable debate grounded in fact. Indeed, Trump’s successful 2016 campaign was mired in false and accusatory statements that, far from discrediting him as a legitimate political player, paved his way to the presidency.

Looking south, the clearest case of liberal politics deteriorating into the fetid morass of hatred, fear, baseless accusations against those seen as enemies rather than political opponents, and growing prosecutions is Brazil – a

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country, until a few years ago, seen as the most exciting rising democracy in the world.

Much has been written about Brazil's dramatic reversal of fortune in recent years. Following a decade of mostly successful governance by the center-left Workers' Party (PT), during which millions were lifted out of abject poverty, massive demonstrations of general dissatisfaction clogged the arteries of the country's major cities in 2013. The effects of the global 2008 recession, myriad corruption scandals, and anger at the public expense incurred by hosting the World Cup (in 2014) and the Olympics (in 2016) drove public anger against the political establishment and the PT in particular. In 2016, protestors once again took to the streets of Brazilian cities, this time to demand the ouster of President Dilma Rousseff, reelected in 2014 by a narrow margin.

Clamorous yet substantively thin calls for Rousseff's impeachment began soon thereafter. Demonstrators characterized the PT era, which began thirteen years earlier with the election of former metalworker and union leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, as an insidious, self-interested plot to subvert the fabric of Brazilian society and align the nation with international pariahs like Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela. Millions saw corruption at the heart of the PT's political project.

In this context, anyone who could claim the mantle of public integrity was bound to profit politically. That man was judge Sergio Moro together with members of Operação Lava Jato, or Operation Car Wash, a sprawling federal investigation that began in 2014 to look into corruption at Brazil's state oil company Petrobras, which most notably resulted in the arrest of former president Lula. Operation Car Wash gave opponents of the PT in government and beyond a potent weapon against the party that had governed the country, albeit not without coalition partners, for over a decade. But by effectively relying on judicial proceedings to dismantle the PT after losing four straight elections, the opposition ceded considerable political influence to an increasingly partisan judiciary.

In doing so, the constellation of parties on the right and center-right fueled a virulent anti-political narrative that set the stage for the rise of extreme-right populist candidate Jair Bolsonaro, a longtime congressman who successfully presented himself as an outsider given how far out of the mainstream his views are. Operation Car Wash, in short, made the extreme appear the only recourse to a system overrun by avarice and self-interest, laundering the authoritarian anti-politics of Bolsonaro, facilitating its takeover of the political mainstream.

Supporters saw Moro, the judge overseeing cases stemming from Car Wash investigations, as the avatar of principled law enforcement, an incorruptible arbiter in a system clearly awash in hefty sums diverted from public coffers for the personal enrichment of seemingly countless politicians. Moro was seen as an honest man in a political culture rotten to its core, the only one willing to challenge business as usual. The most prominent example of his courage was, for supporters, the imprisonment of the immensely popular – and, thus, presumably untouchable – Lula da Silva. While Moro was feted at home and abroad as a noble crusader against malfeasance, critics from the start pointed to problems with the way he handled his cases, citing the judge's disregard for traditional Brazilian jurisprudence when it came to Lula as a sign of bias. The judge then appeared to confirm charges of political bias by becoming Justice Minister in the administration of Jair Bolsonaro, the man in all of Brazil who benefited most from Lula's sentencing (Lula led every public opinion poll in the run-up to the election).

Whatever doubt remained about the purity of Moro's intentions and the integrity of Operation Car Wash has been erased in recent weeks by *The Intercept* which acquired a massive trove of internal communications and documents exposing the animus undergirding the case against Lula. Moro, the supposedly impartial judge intent on combating widespread corruption in all levels of the political system, in fact systematically colluded with the prosecution – by instructing who should be interrogated and how to extract the most dramatic impacts from plea bargains leaked to the country's oligopolistic media conglomerates, mainly the conservative network Globo TV, in ways not constitutionally sanctioned.

Moreover, the latest batch of released communication between judge Moro and the prosecution (mainly with lead prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol) clearly revealed the selective, partisan nature of Operation Car Wash: Moro discouraged Dallagnol from looking into seemingly corrupt deals involving former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, someone who Moro considered an important ally in going after Cardoso's main political opponent, former

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president Lula da Silva.

Notwithstanding, the vividly described political nature of Moro's modus operandi in the last several years, much of the mainstream media has minimized the content of the revelations. Cardoso, who remains one of Brazil's most influential political commentators, was one of the first to do so. Similarly, conversations in the media and around kitchen tables across the country emphasized the illicit nature by which the communications between Moro and Dallagnol had been obtained (by hacking their cell phone conversation on the Telegram messaging app) rather the content themselves.

Moro's image has been tarnished in the last months, starting when he agreed to serve as Bolsonaro's Justice Minister, joining an administration that likely would not exist had Lula, still the country's most popular politician, not been arrested and barred from running in last year's election. If political debates functioned solely on the basis of evidence-based rational dialogue, one should expect that Moro would have discredited himself more fully both among journalists and especially among voters throughout the country. Though new polls in this regard have not been published yet, what is seen in Brazil is only the further polarization of Moro's and Bolsonaro's supporters who continue to assert, despite all contrary evidence, the heroic stature of both men in cleansing the country of the Workers' Party's corruption, though Lula's involvement in corrupt schemes in his administration are yet to be fairly and legally demonstrated.

In this sense, similar to US politics where Trump supporters still claim, sincerely or cynically, that he has been 'draining the swamp,' all evidence against such claim notwithstanding, the Brazilian middle class, in tandem with similar anti-democratic trends around the world, continues to operate on a hypocritical basis that picks and chooses which type of corruption is to be combated and which is to be, at best, dismissed, when not proudly owned as acceptable given that it favors their own interests.

Perhaps more than enlightenment, Kantian-like politics of expanding the democratic sphere by shedding light over previously unknown facts, today's liberal politics seems to function much more along clear Machiavellian lines of crude political actions wherein the end justifies the means, any means. In this sense, reconciling the democratic goals of Liberalism or, especially, even more progressive politics of the late 20th century with ever more aggressive, fake news-based, neo-fascist right-wing populism might be the greatest and arguably most important political challenge of our time.

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