

Conclusion

Freedom, Justice, and Solidarity for Brazil? The Political Class under Dictatorship and Democracy

In 1941, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig coined the term “land of the future” to describe Brazil.¹ And as Brazilians often add wryly, “And it always will be.” After a “lost decade” of debt and hyperinflation, in the mid-1990s that future finally began to arrive. Paradoxically, it was under the New Republic (1985–present), particularly after 2002, that a democratic Brazil achieved two of the generals’ three goals: economic stability and reduced social unrest (what the military called “subversion”). No one could have imagined in 1985 that in three decades Brazil would reduce the number of people living in poverty by the tens of millions, emerge as a global economic and diplomatic power, and even host the World Cup and Olympic Games. At the same time, a chastened military accepted a reduced political role, a development that, together with the massive increase in popular mobilization, offered hope that Brazil could achieve its new constitution’s goal to create a society that was *livre, justa, e solidária*. Freedom, justice, and solidarity for a country that had known too little of all three. As always, however, the success or failure of this project would hinge on the collaboration of the political class.

Tragically, Neves fell ill on the eve of his inauguration and died without taking office. In one of history’s crueler ironies, he was replaced by Sarney, one of the last politicians to abandon the generals. Yet Sarney, always a pragmatic Brazilian liberal, could read the tea leaves as well as anyone, and he recognized the depth of Brazilians’ yearning for change. The generals’ most faithful ally presided over the restoration of direct presidential elections, the granting of the vote to illiterates, the legalization of the PCB and PCdoB, and the promulgation of a new constitution in 1988 that, despite flaws, reflected the political class’s expanded conception of citizenship. When Sarney handed the presidential sash to his successor, Fernando Collor de Mello, in 1990, it was the first time since 1960 that one civilian president

had peacefully relinquished power to another, the first of five such transfers over the next three decades. Although Collor resigned in 1992 after he was impeached on corruption charges, his vice president, Itamar Franco, together with Fernando Henrique Cardoso, his minister of finance, implemented the famed “real plan,” which ended hyperinflation that had reached 2,477 percent in 1993.

The success of the real plan propelled Cardoso and his party, the Party of Brazilian Social Democracy, to the presidency.² Considering his past as a Marxist sociologist, one might have expected Cardoso to turn Brazil sharply to the left. Once in office, however, Cardoso embraced neoliberal economic prescriptions, particularly the privatization of state-owned industries.³ But Cardoso also implemented policies that reduced illiteracy, expanded access to education, improved health care, and combated racism. Between 1990 and 2000, quality of life (as measured by the Human Development Index) had risen in 99.9 percent of municipalities.⁴ Brazil became a global model for its HIV prevention and treatment programs, with universal free condom distribution and free antiretrovirals for anyone living with the virus.⁵

Yet it was under the governments of the PT’s Lula (2003–10) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–16) that the promise of Brazil’s democratization was most fully realized. After losing three consecutive times, in 2002 Lula and the PT scaled back their socialist rhetoric in favor of a more attainable social democracy that preserved orthodox macroeconomic policy. In part this constituted an acknowledgment that Cardoso’s stabilization plan had worked, but it was also a concession to reality in a fragmented party system in which the PT never controlled more than 17.5 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. While compromises like these earned the party the condemnation of some on the Brazilian and international radical Left, the thirteen years of PT rule produced the greatest reductions in equality and advances toward inclusion in Brazil’s history.⁶ The minimum wage was increased by nearly 80 percent. Unemployment fell from 13 to 7 percent. GDP rose from \$1.3 trillion to \$1.8 trillion, and by 2012, Brazil’s economy had become the seventh largest in the world. Extreme poverty fell from 11 to 4 percent. The Gini measure of inequality fell from 0.58 to 0.52. The percentage of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds going to college rose from 11 to 18 percent.⁷ Brazil became recognized as a global model for reducing inequality.

These accomplishments stemmed from the lessons the political class learned during the military dictatorship, particularly the realization that if Brazil were to enjoy long-term democratic stability, its political elite would have to accept expanded participation and reduced socioeconomic exclusion. For twenty-one years, politicians had been subjected to a form of authoritarian tutelage not so different from the paternalism they had attempted to exercise over the popular classes for five centuries. Undoubtedly some still yearned for the days when they could stifle popular aspirations, but the growth of civil society meant those days were gone. Like Guimarães, Montoro, and the rest at the final Diretas Já protest,

politicians could let themselves be swept along by the crowd or be trampled. The popular forces they had helped unleash could not be easily stopped.

While it is often said that history is the study of change over time, it would be more accurate (not to mention Hegelian) to say that it is the study of the tensions between continuity and change as they interact amid present contingencies. How can the changes and continuities among the political class under the military regime explain the contradictions of Brazil's democratization when politicians combined their openness to increased popular participation with a determination to salvage what they could of the power, wealth, and impunity that people like them had enjoyed since time immemorial? The continuities, amply noted by scholars of democratic consolidation, help explain the parliamentary coup that toppled the left-wing government of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the political class's collaboration with the racist, sexist, homophobic Bolsonaro since 2018.⁸ The changes, while more subtle, give hope that this conservative reaction against the advances of the past three and a half decades will founder.

This tension appears in nearly every chapter.⁹ Chapter 1 emphasized the familial, racial, and class affinities that bound liberal politicians to leftist university students, the presumed leaders of Brazil by merit or birth. Today Brazilian politics (along with the judiciary and many civil service positions) remains a largely hereditary affair in which the youths of today are anointed the leaders of tomorrow.¹⁰ Even when someone new climbs into the political elite, they usually adopt this value as their own; indeed, one need look no further than Bolsonaro, an army captain from a hamlet in the interior of São Paulo whose three oldest sons are now all elected politicians whom he protects as assiduously as politicians defended students in 1968.

Another persistent tendency among the Brazilian political class is the desire to restore, preserve, or enhance its members' prerogatives. As discussed in chapter 2, when the Chamber of Deputies took a stand on parliamentary immunity, they showed that they believed something vital—their right to lead Brazil and express themselves as they saw fit—had been taken away. In a democratic Brazil, the political class restored many of these privileges. Despite its progressive mechanisms to facilitate popular participation, the 1988 constitution also maintained the political class's prerogatives largely intact. The constitution reversed many of the military's centralizing measures and devolved power to states and municipalities, as was in vogue throughout Latin America in the era of neoliberalism, thus returning significant local power to the very political class that the military had (justifiably, some might argue) mistrusted.¹¹

It was not just prerogatives that the political class wanted back; it was their de facto impunity as members of Brazil's socioeconomic elite (the *classes dirigentes* in Brazilian parlance). Chapter 3 emphasized the resentment politicians felt as the dictatorship mistreated them in the wake of AI-5. However, their indignation did not arise solely from their respect for liberal institutions but also from the belief

that their wealth, power, and status should exempt them from repression.¹² Even the *autênticos* were more concerned with the violence perpetrated on university-educated “subversives” than with the nearly genocidal violence the Brazilian state has always visited on those seen as socially and racially inferior. Today university students are seldom taken to interrogation centers to be tortured, but young Black men returning home from a night on the town can still be stopped by the police and summarily executed under the flimsiest of pretenses.¹³ Despite widespread outrage among social movements, the political class has shown little interest in restraining the police forces that keep the masses at bay. If anything, the role of repressive institutions has grown, with a dramatic increase in the number of former military and police elected to Congress, culminating in the election of the soldier Bolsonaro, who openly advocates that police kill more *bandidos* (criminals).¹⁴

Chapters 4 and 5 illustrated another enduring characteristic of the political class: the primacy of the local pursuit of power over ideology or party. While a few courageous *autênticos* opted for frontal opposition based on the dictatorship’s gross violations of democratic norms, most members of the political class collaborated with the military or simply kept their heads down, hoping to wait out the storm under the tree. When opposition did emerge, it was not because the *autênticos* convinced the rank and file of politicians that their cause was just but because pragmatists like Quêrcia and Maluf promised them a chance at seizing local- and state-level power from their rivals. This disregard for party and ideology endures. Today, an astounding twenty-four parties are represented in the Chamber of Deputies, which makes Brazil the foremost country in the world for “party fragmentation.” The result is a politics of coalition building that uses patronage (particularly cabinet appointments) to secure the conditional collaboration of ideologically bankrupt parties. This was precisely the tendency the military sought to resolve with the two-party system, but as their own concessions like *sublegendas* showed, combating *fisiologismo* was and remains an uphill, perhaps unwinnable, battle.

Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrated the promises and limits of the political class’s embrace of popular mobilization, even as they harnessed it to topple the regime that had so vexed them. Although politicians risked their physical integrity to protect workers in 1980, men like Cardoso and Montoro balked at Lula’s call for a nation directed by workers instead of elites who acted on their behalf. Similarly, in the 1984 succession crisis, although the democratic opposition was willing to use mass mobilization to topple the regime, they were more comfortable with back-room deals like the one that elected Neves and Sarney, icons of the chameleon-like traditional elite. This instrumental use of popular mobilization endures. *O povo na rua* (the people in the streets) sounds laudable, until one analyzes which *povo* is in the street and whose ends they serve. This attitude, dormant since the 1992 impeachment of Collor, came to the fore again in 2015–16, as the political class embraced the media-fueled “mass mobilization” of the middle and upper classes

to overthrow Rousseff.¹⁵ The political class remains willing to endorse popular mobilization but only when it serves their ends.

It is indisputable that the military regime failed in its attempts to transform the political class into a pliant, patriotic elite that governed for the common good. None of this is particularly surprising. Ultimately, we humans are animals like any other. Like our chimpanzee cousins, we endlessly jockey for status, using others as tools to achieve our personal ends. Why is it surprising that the Brazilian political class would seek to transfer power to their children, assiduously defend their own prerogatives and impunity, elevate personal advancement over principles, and use the masses only when convenient? Are they any different from North American and European politicians, status-obsessed primates like themselves? These do not make Brazilian politicians deficient compared to a Global North ideal: they make them human.

It is more fruitful, as well as politically useful, to examine the changes. Brazilian elites have always sought to preserve their prerogatives to benefit themselves and their children, but they have not always countenanced the level of popular mobilization seen since the late 1970s. Continuities are to be expected. It is in the changes among the political class under military rule that we can best ascertain the prospects for a reversal of the politically and socially regressive agenda that has dominated Brazil since 2016. Chapters 1 and 2 showed that a decisive portion of the Chamber of Deputies chose to collectively rebel when they saw their children and prerogatives threatened by an encroaching military. But is that all that was happening? As the final debate around the Moreira Alves case demonstrated, the political class was motivated not only by their prerogatives, but by a reverence for what they understood as democracy. Elitist and liberal though these values might have been, they also showed that the political class cared deeply about being faithful representatives of the people as they understood them. Unlike the military (and today the judiciary, federal prosecutors, and other civil servants), politicians recognize that they are beholden to the will of their voters. If public opinion turns against Bolsonaro as it turned against Dilma and the PT, the military and civil service will have the luxury of remaining silent, but the political class will have to pick a side.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyzed the shock and frustration felt by politicians as the military trampled on their dignity and privileges. Most of the political class had accepted a military coup in 1964, which they thought would be merely the latest in a long line of brief military interventions that had upended Brazilian politics since the fall of the Empire in 1889. After twenty-one years of traumatic and humiliating military tutelage, politicians were determined not to allow such a disaster to befall them again. To be sure, the military's relative withdrawal from politics, particularly since the election of Collor in 1992, owes much to a consensus among the Armed Forces that another direct political intervention would be ill advised. But the fact remains that every previous military intervention was legitimized by the

acquiescence of a decisive majority of the political class—something unlikely to happen again any time soon.¹⁶

Whereas in 1968 the political class defended a narrowly defined liberal democracy, by 1974 the opposition had begun to realize that their only path to power lay in expanding their appeal to the working class by emphasizing the bread-and-butter issues that mattered to them. Chapter 5 showed how this change in strategy was implemented above all in São Paulo, via an alliance between the liberal Montoro, the pragmatic upstart Quércia, and the ambitious intellectual Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The most immediate effect of this approach was an MDB landslide in that year's Senate elections, but the long-term consequences would be even more important. Although development had long been a sacred value for the Brazilian upper classes and intelligentsia, 1974 was when the terms of the debate began to shift to emphasize development in the pursuit of reducing inequality.¹⁷ This was perhaps the most enduring legacy of the military regime and the transformations it wrought on the political class. The advances that began under Cardoso and intensified under the PT signified a profound change in the material conditions and social relations of one of the world's most unequal countries.

The final two chapters used the 1978–80 São Paulo metalworker strikes and the 1984 Diretas Já demonstrations to illustrate how many in the political class embraced mass mobilization to help rid themselves of military tutelage. The hundreds of thousands of striking paulista workers and the millions of protesters demanding direct elections were a nearly unprecedented sight in Brazil. To be sure, the acceptance of mass mobilization was often instrumental and always conditional, and politicians still preferred, when they could, to resolve impasses with backroom deals (what political scientists call “elite pacts”), but once the genie of popular mobilization had been let out of the bottle, it was impossible to put it back in. Mass protests played a decisive role in convincing the political class to support the impeachments of Collor (1992) and Rousseff (2016) alike. Strikes also remained a universally accepted strategy for the working class to negotiate for better living and working conditions.¹⁸ In a country whose elites had long lived by the mantra, “The social question is a police question,” this newfound tolerance for mass participation in politics was vastly significant.

Thus did the political class's attitudes concerning democracy, the military's role in politics, and mass mobilization shift under military rule. These changes were the product of thousands upon thousands of individual choices based not simply on principle, but more commonly the exigencies of the moment. When a politician saw police harass a student daughter, a friend cassado by the military, a hated rival join their party, an opportunity for self-advancement via a new electoral strategy, the military ignoring the rules of the game, workers needing protection, or the masses demanding direct elections, they made decisions that collectively altered the course of Brazilian history and began to transform the way the political class understood its relationship with the Brazilian people. Though their wealth,

education, socialization, and the other factors producing their dispositions did not change, some of those fundamental ways of seeing the world did shift, and the political class's habitus changed accordingly. Habitus shaped the decisions politicians made, and the decisions in turn reshaped the habitus.¹⁹ Moreover, since 1985 the political class has begun to undergo a metamorphosis to become more reflective of Brazilian society. In 1978, only 4 of 420 federal deputies were women; four decades later, 77 women were elected to a Chamber of 513 seats.²⁰ In 1982, only 4 federal deputies identified as Black or Brown;²¹ by 2018, this number had risen to 125.²² Significantly, however, this diversification of the political class has been largely limited to race and gender. When it comes to social class, Congress remains nearly as elitist as ever. Although the proportion of lawyers in the Chamber fell from 56 to 19.1 percent between 1978 and 2018, that of businesspeople and industrialists rose from 11.4 to 26.3 percent.²³ Rich lawyers have been replaced by rich businesspeople. While working-class people have made some inroads, the two largest nontraditional professions represented in Congress today are military or police and evangelical pastors, both groups that tend to promote submission to authority and resist broad social transformation. While today's political class is no longer made up exclusively of wealthy, conservative, white men, it is still largely made up of wealthy, conservative people who, when push comes to shove, will side against popular aspirations to protect the interests of their social class—as the past decade of Brazilian politics has shown in lurid detail.

When I completed the first iteration of this project in 2013, the argument seemed straightforward: two decades of forced submission to military tutelage had created a genuine democratic and participatory consciousness among the political class, paving the way for the New Republic's unprecedented expansion of democracy and opportunity. But progress is never linear; it is contested, contingent, and subject to innumerable setbacks as it threatens entrenched power and wealth. No one in early 2013 could have foreseen the mass protests that rocked Brazil that June, the media-driven demonstrations against Rousseff, the farcical impeachment trial, the return to neoliberalism by Rousseff's vice president, Michel Temer, or the imprisonment of Lula on trumped up corruption charges, which enabled the election of the most right-wing politician in Brazil to the presidency. How deep could the changes wrought by the regime really have been if the bulk of the political class could so easily be persuaded to endorse all this? Doesn't this prove that Brazilian elites are just as deficient as democratization literature posited?

The problem with this line of reasoning is not so much that it is invalid but rather that it ascribes the greatest significance to the least surprising characteristics of the political class. Why would we expect politicians anywhere to put ideology, the common good, and party identification before an opportunity to enjoy political power and personal gain? After all, the four years of the Trump presidency demonstrated just how un beholden the Republican Party is to democratic norms. And even as the Democratic Party cast itself as the party of norms,

institutions, and social justice, Joe Biden was reminding wealthy donors that “nothing would fundamentally change” if he was elected. Can we truly claim that the United States is an “advanced democracy” anymore (if it ever was one to begin with)? Of course Brazilian politicians abandoned Rousseff and Lula when the winds changed. They had done exactly the same in 1985, when they fled the military’s sinking ship, and in 1964, when they helped overthrow Goulart because of the threat he was thought to represent to entrenched social relations.

These continuities only serve to highlight the significant transformations that did occur among the political class. The definitive rejection of direct military interventions in politics, the recognition that the goal of development should be the reduction of inequality, and the acceptance of strikes and mass mobilization as a fact of life were all major changes for a political elite that has always been defined by the use of force to keep popular aspirations at bay. These shifts helped create unprecedented opportunities for workers, Afro-Brazilians, Indigenous people, LGBTQ+ people, landless and homeless workers, and many others to advocate for their rights as Brazilian citizens, to challenge old hierarchies, and to realize a new sense of dignity, empowerment, and self-respect. Today Bolsonaro might wish he had the opportunity to rule in such an authoritarian manner as the generals of a generation ago, but over forty years of expanded participation and reduced inequality have left their mark, and it is doubtful that he could suppress popular longings for long if he ever tried in earnest to do so.

Today, amid Bolsonaro’s assault on the working class and marginalized groups, Tancredo Neves’s words ring as true as they did in 1985: “We will not disperse. We will continue gathered . . . with the same emotion, the same dignity, and the same resolve. Nearly two hundred years ago, Tiradentes, that hero driven crazy by hope, told us, ‘If we all want to, we can make this country into a great nation.’ Let’s do it.” Aided by the changes that occurred in the political class between 1964 and 1985, the Brazilian people have spent the past three decades fulfilling this admonition. Those of us who have been moved and inspired by their struggle know that neither a coup nor unjust imprisonments nor even a Far Right demagogue will hold them back for long.