

The Brazilian Matrix: Between Fascism and Neo-Liberalism

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Abstract

This is a conversation that took place at Dr. Vladimir Safatle's São Paulo home on 16 February, 2019, during Dr. Samir Gandesha's time as a Visiting Professor at the Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas - FFLCH-USP (Universidade de São Paulo). It addresses the South American roots of the authoritarian Neoliberalism that has now become a truly global phenomenon.

Keywords

Neoliberalism, Fascism, Critical theory, Brazil, South America, Psychoanalysis

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The Brazilian Matrix: Between Fascism and Neo-Liberalism

Vladimir Safatle and Samir Gandesha in Conversation¹

Vladimir Safatle was born in Chile in the year that General Augusto Pinochet seized power from Salvador Allende who had been elected as President three years previously. Pinochet's dictatorship, which would last until 1990, was profoundly consequential not simply for the anti-Communist politics throughout Latin America, but also as the "laboratory" of the incipient radical "free market" ideology, later referred to as "neoliberalism," that would subsequently first conquer Britain via Thatcher, the United States via Reagan, and Canada via Mulroney, and then to the rest of the world with the assistance of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank under the aegis of "globalization." Pinochet's regime itself, however, was inscribed with the lie that neoliberalism represented simply the ideology of the free market for it also, of course, entailed the presence of the "strong state." In this early instantiation of neoliberalism, we can see the contours of neoliberalism's own history; that is to say, its own authoritarian core as is now becoming patently obvious in present-day Brazil.

It was from Brazil that Safatle's parents fled during the twenty-one-year long military dictatorship that lasted from the coup against the regime of João Goulart until the election of Tancredo Neves. Both of his parents were militants who were driven underground from which they battled the repressive state apparatus commanded by the generals. Like many dictatorships in Latin America—not only Chile's but also the military junta in Argentina that lasted from the over-throw of Isabel Perón in March, 1976, to a return to "democracy" in December, 1983—Brazil's was marked by considerable violence. Although, for the current Brazilian president, it was apparently not violent enough. However, unlike these other historical experiences, the trauma of that violence was never properly addressed and this contributed to the conditions in which an authoritarianism never "worked through," one lying latent in the interstices of history, can become, in uncanny form, manifest yet again.

While Safatle's work was focused on the tradition of social and political critique that took inspiration from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, in particular the contributions of Theodor W. Adorno, as well as Lacanian psychoanalysis and radical philosophers such as Alain Badiou, it was not until the Arab Spring, beginning at the end of 2010, did he begin to make substantive interventions in the political field. He covered the uprisings from Tunis and

Cairo for the Brazilian media and conducted interviews with many Tunisians and Egyptians as history was unfolding. Shortly thereafter, he was approached to become involved in party politics, although this did not work out insofar as he refused to bend to the imperatives of the party machinery (PSOL). He has become one of the pre-eminent and most outspoken public intellectuals in Brazil, a country with a long and rich history of public debates, as a columnist and frequent guest on current-affairs television shows. He is also an accomplished pianist who frequently plays the local clubs in São Paulo.

Safatle is Professor and Director of Research in the Department of Philosophy and the Institute of Psychology, and President of the International Relations Office at the Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil. He has served as Visiting Professor at the Université de Paris VII, the Université de Paris VIII, Université de Toulouse, Essex University, and the Université Catholique de Louvain; as fellow at Stellenbosch Institute of Advanced Studies (STIAS, South Africa); and as a lecturer at Collège International de Philosophie, Paris. He was also Visiting scholar at University of California - Berkeley. He is one of the coordinators of the International Society of Psychoanalysis and Philosophy (ISPP). He is responsible for the translation of Adorno's complete works into Portuguese. He is the author of, among others: *Grand Hotel Abyss: Desire, Recognition and the Restoration of the Subject* (Leuven University Press, 2016, Portuguese ed., 2012); *La izquierda que no teme decir su nombre* (LOM ediciones, 2013, Portuguese ed., 2012); *La Passion du négatif: Lacan et la dialectique* (Georg Olms 2010, Portuguese ed., 2006); *Dar corpo ao impossível: o sentido da dialética após Adorno* (2019); *O circuito dos afetos: corpos políticos, desamparo e o fim do indivíduo* (2016, Spanish edition 2019); and *Cinismo e falência da crítica* (2008).

Samir Gandesha has been a post-doctoral fellow at the University of California at Berkeley (1995–97) and an Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow at the Universität Potsdam (2001–2002). He is currently Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities and the Director of the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University. He specializes in modern European thought and culture, with a particular emphasis on the relation between politics, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis. He is the author of numerous refereed articles and book chapters and is co-editor with Lars Rensmann of *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations* (Stanford, 2012). He is co-editor with Johan Hartle of *Spell of*

Capital: Reification and Spectacle (University of Amsterdam Press, 2017) and Aesthetic Marx (Bloomsbury Press, 2017). He is editor of the recently-published Spectres of Fascism: Historical, Theoretical and Contemporary Perspectives (Pluto, 2020). In the Spring of 2017, he was the Liu Boming Visiting Scholar in Philosophy at the University of Nanjing and Visiting Lecturer at Suzhou University of Science and Technology in China. In January 2019, he was Visiting Fellow at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe.

This conversation took place at Dr. Vladimir Safatle's São Paulo home on 16 February, 2019, during Dr. Samir Gandesha's time as a Visiting Professor at the Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas - FFLCH-USP (Universidade de São Paulo).

Samir Gandesha: I suppose we can start with a question about the larger context within which to situate developments in Brazil and, hopefully, we'll also make intelligible certain lateral comparisons with other states. It is possible to understand the fear and insecurity upon which authoritarian populism feeds as constituted by the two key events of the 21st century: the 9/11 attacks on the United States (11 September 2001) and the ensuing "War on Terror," on the one hand, and then the 2007–2008 financial crash, on the other. The first could be said to energize the ideology of neoconservatism articulated by figures like Robert Kagan and the Project for the New American Century. The Bush Administration itself seized this moment to further its aims of supposedly spreading "democracy," a term I use advisedly, throughout the world, particularly the Middle East. And then the second moment, the financial crash, is the result of neoliberal deregulation and privatization. The collision of these two processes leads to an opening for authoritarian populism insofar as you have both a refugee crisis and a socioeconomic crisis. Neoliberalism manufactures conditions of fear and insecurity through precarity and deepening austerity conditions, which we are well familiar with now—this is no surprise and nothing new. And neoconservatism delivers ever more displaced persons, migrants, and refugees, what Hannah Arendt calls "pariahs," who figure as enemies for exclusionary definitions of "the people," through this friend-and-foe binary.

Before we can go on to talk about how this might be legible in Brazil, I'd be very interested to know what you make of this, not just from a geopolitical standpoint but also from the viewpoint of your own orientation in thinking about Adorno and Lacan, their psychoanalytic dimensions in particular. How can they help us understand some of these dynamics?

Vladimir Safatle: I think that we need a theory of affect to understand politics today and I think that the best theory of affect that we can find came from psychoanalysis. I know that “affect” is not exactly a word in Lacan; even in Freud, you cannot find this word. You can find “drive,” you can find “desire.” But, I try to show how there is an implicit theory of affect in psychoanalysis, especially if we accept that the major social affect for Freud is *helplessness*—not fear, not love, not hope, but *helplessness*. I try to show how this is an emancipatory affect, and not exactly an affect linked to servitude.

SG: Can we connect this sense of helplessness to some understanding of finitude, a certain kind of mutual dependence, mutual recognition, something like that?

VS: I would say the opposite. We see today the following paradox: the political imagination is blocked while we have very high levels of social suffering, of social disidentification. We see how it’s almost impossible to govern today. There is the fear of an “ungovernable” society. This is a very interesting thing and very specific for *our time*: it means there is a strong sense of social disidentification, that is, no agreement on the social contract of liberal democracy anymore. And there’s no discernible tendency towards a new type of political or socioeconomic structure. And I think one of the reasons for that could be understood just at the psychic level. We should ask: why isn’t it possible to imagine a radically different kind of society? There is a social mobilization of affects that appears to be blocking our sociopolitical imagination. We see, for example, melancholy is crucial for social cohesion because it is an affect in which power forecloses every tendency towards movement. Getting back to your question, we know, after 2001, fear became the most important political affect in our global societies—not just in Europe and the United States, but also in the Global South, like Brazil and so on.

Then there is this question about why psychoanalysis is the core for a theory of political affects. Take, for example, this very strong political affect for Freud: helplessness, as I mentioned earlier. Of course, we can think helplessness can create a demand for care and we know all this politics of care that we see today: these attempts to reduce the political dimension to the psychological problems about care and a very terrible type of recognition. If you take the clinical works of Freud further, one is led to stress the following point: we *cannot* heal helplessness, because helplessness is an affect that opens us to contingency; for something that

dispossesses me dispossesses the other too; and this is something that I cannot anticipate. We should also accept the Spinozan idea that fear and hope are intrinsically connected: there is no hope without fear, there is no fear without hope. It's not a question of trying to surmount a politics of fear by way of a politics of hope. We need to understand why, in post-teleological politics, we need to accept the helplessness that contingent events and the experience of dispossession can produce in us. And, of course, this is a way to criticize every sense of this use of *identity* in politics today. Even when this comes from "progressive" politics.

SG: That's fascinating, and maybe we can come back to some of those themes. My next question has to do with this discussion that happened maybe about 10–15 years ago, about so-called "Brazilification."² It was really very much a part of the discourse in the media as well: the *New York Times*, for example, would take this up quite routinely. The discussion here is about the "Brazilification" of Western societies, the Global North, the United States, in particular; but these days, it also seems like there's a reversal, insofar as Bolsonaro is often referred to as the "Trump of the Tropics," so there's a mutual effect. It seems as if both Brazilification and its opposite are true. The first names obscene levels of socioeconomic inequality often overdetermined by race, gender, or indigeneity in this society. This also, of course, characterizes North American and western European societies where, as Thomas Piketty has shown, there is a growing gap between the minority elite and the vast majority of society. The second names a demagogic, authoritarian, and white-supremacist response to the obvious political contradictions that this growing gap leads (or returns) to. To what extent does this twofold comparison make sense here, in Brazil? And how can we understand psychoanalysis here, the effects of deepening and accelerating neoliberalism, and this rise of authoritarianism, in the obvious figure of Bolsonaro?

VS: I think there are two questions: the first is about "Brazilification" (what does it really mean?); the second is, really, this type of Brazilian fascist neoliberalism. What was interesting for me when Ulrich Beck used this term, "Brazilification," was that it implies the following: if you want to understand global capitalism, you need to see the periphery, not the core countries because, at the periphery, you can see some contradictions that would be more visible in the center in the future. Brazil today is a world laboratory for a certain type of fascist neoliberalism. If we go back to Marcuse, he was able, already at the beginning of the thirties,

to understand that the idea of the total state is not, in fact, in opposition to the liberal idea of state. We can also think at the Heller/Schmitt- debate at this time. Let's remember Hayek talking about Chile: "I have not been able to find a single person even in much-maligned Chile who did not agree that personal freedom was much greater under Pinochet than it had been under Allende."³ This is really the expression of a certain tendency inside the history of neoliberalism that first used Chile as a kind of big laboratory for that. And, of course, what the far-right is doing in Brazil is recuperating this paradigm and trying to "modernize" it now.

SG: One of the key components that is missing, perhaps, and Perry Anderson makes this clear in his discussion in the *London Review of Books* of André Singer's book *O lulismo em crise: Um quebra-cabeça do período Dilma, 2011–16* ('Lulism in Crisis: A Puzzle of the Dilma Period') (which he amazingly compares favorably to Marx's *18th Brumaire!*)—and where he says that you can't necessarily understand Bolsonaro and the forces that he embodies as responding to the threat of revolution—is that, as Walter Benjamin says, "fascism emerges in the aftermath of a failed revolution." (Anderson 2019) But, Samir Amin's recent article on fascism in *Monthly Review* argues that fascism responds to crises within capitalism per se. (Amin 2004) So, we could say of 2007/2008, and especially in Brazil after 2011, that there's a downturn in 2011, followed by massive protests in São Paulo in 2013 against increasing transportation costs, but then—because of a heavy police response—they reverberate through the whole country.

VS: Just a correction: we didn't have a crisis in 2011 or 2012, and this was a very impressive thing in Brazil. Actually, the Brazilian economy grew considerably in 2010/2011—I think in 2010, it was 7.5%. I can see that, in fact, but this was the interesting thing: there was no core economic crisis before. Even 2013 was not the result of economic crisis; it is a result of a relative deprivation. You are talking about a country that believed, for example, that in 2019, we would be the fifth strongest economy in the world. During that period, we hosted, for example, the World Cup and the Olympic Games, and the government said, "Look, we will rebuild the cities. We will create big infrastructure projects, new airports, and new public transportation systems, and so on." Everybody was really expecting a turning point in the Brazilian economy, and then, suddenly, we realized that this was not going to happen. We had 42 million people who started the process of changing their class position. These people

expected that they could continue this process. But, in 2013, they were confronted with the grim reality that this would not be possible because the economic model in Brazil was one that was dependent on poor populist coalitions—the textbook-Laclauian idea that populism is the result of a hegemonic formation within a heterogeneous space. The Lula Government was really the best example that one can imagine because it was a government built on a heterogeneous alliance comprised of social movements, trade unions, the church, the conservative oligarchies, the financial system, ecologists and agro business. It was precisely on account of its very *heterogeneity* that it was not sustainable.

Take what happened with this class that was just growing in an economic perspective. The first thing that they decided was to take their children out of public schools and place them in private ones. The second thing they decided to do was to get out of the public health system and to buy private health insurance. And, finally, they decided to exit the public transportation system and to buy cars. So, they have three new obligations: private schools, private health system, and private transportation. Approximately one half of these people's salary goes to these new needs. And, of course, they felt that this was the limit because the state would never be able to give them viable public services as this would entail a classical social-democratic system of tax revenues. And this was not possible in Brazil because, for example, the highest marginal tax rate is 27.5%, which is lower than in the United States.

But if you try to change that...

SG: You have a revolt!

VS: Yes, it could even be a revolution.

SG: A counter-revolution!

So, one of the problems with this strategy was raising the poor out of the conditions of their poverty and calling this a kind of new middle class, probably with some anticipation that they would continue to see a rise in their socioeconomic condition. When there was a certain reversal, a certain slowing of growth, you had, then, this relative frustration. So, rather than actually investing in public institutions: public schools, public healthcare, public transportation, you have this production of neoliberal subjects who are very much invested in consumption and have a sense of themselves as part of a “middle class,” but who are

objectively in a much more precarious condition. So, they then join in with the established middle class as part of what is not now a military coup, but a judicial one, against the very government that raised them out of poverty.

VS: Correct. But, I would stress two other points. The first one is that the Lula Government wasn't based on a politics of socioeconomic equality. It was a government geared to a politics of capitalizing on the poor, and also the rich for that matter.

SG: So, the middle class also felt squeezed? A classical recipe for fascism.

VS: Yes! But, the question is: what happened with this kind of system? Well, we will have things like, for example, cities such as Luanda that, like Moscow, were amongst the most expensive cities in the world at this time. And, for example, in 2013, São Paulo and Rio, unusually, were two of the ten most expensive cities in the world. Because, of course, of the financial practices of the ultra-rich.

SG: Speculating on real estate that results in what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession.”

VS: Exactly. And, this was the reason that from 2010 to 2014, the price of real estate in São Paulo increased by up to 300%.

This is one point. The second point is, with the second government of Dilma Rouseff, we had a very weak government that was fighting against parliament, a parliament that sought to shut the government down. And, of course, we had an economic crisis, though a minor one. With the political crisis, this economic crisis became explosive. The economic failure was not just a failure of a model of development, it was always a very strong political crisis that became the pretext for bringing down the PT Government.

SG: That brings me to the discussion of the work of Laclau and Mouffe. Laclau, obviously, coming from an Argentinian context, was very much influenced by the experience of Perónism and was trying to address the failure of the Second Socialist International, more generally, but then was also looking specifically at the Argentinian left and theorizing a form of populism as a specific way of conceiving of a socialist strategy. Mouffe, as you know, has recently published a book in defense of left populism, *For a Left Populism* (2018), and the argument is, essentially, that left populism can be understood in terms of, as we were saying, this

articulation of heterogeneous demands against a kind of antagonistic frontier in opposition to the oligarchy. Mouffe sees the left populist project as articulating this antagonism between the people, or the *demos*, on the one hand, and the *oligarchy*, on the other. Right populism cannot be understood as this kind of inclusive definition of the people based upon different social-economic demands against the bearers of a certain form of economic and social-political power but, rather, as an exclusionary conception of the people based on some ethnonational identity against an enemy that takes a personalized form. So, rather than talking about the structure of capital, or talking about the one percent in this kind of structural way, right populism will identify a figure like George Soros and say it's, yet again, some attempt at world domination on the part of Jewish bankers and so on. Is it possible to understand, or to conceive of, some kind of truth-value in the claim that what we see in a figure like Lula and the PT is a form of left populism? Whereas what we're seeing in Bolsonaro and the social forces he represents is a kind of right populist response? In other words, everything hinges upon how the "people," the very subject of democracy, is defined.

VS: I would like to start by saying there is a problem—at least one problem—with European and US intellectuals. They think that everything that happens in Europe and the US is unique. Then nobody, or nothing, that happens elsewhere could help them to understand their situation. But, we have here in Latin America a strong tradition of left populist governance. As you suggest, before Lula, we, of course, had Chávez and before him, Perón, as we were mentioning. This was a major trend of the left, here, in Latin America, and the results were *terrible*. When I see these people saying "we need a left populism," as if these ideas were totally new, I think that this is totally deluded.

SG: Although, to be fair to Laclau and Mouffe, their particular theorizing of left populism comes precisely out of an analysis of Perónism...

VS: But Laclau never was able to understand why Perón failed—why the Perónists failed—and, indeed, he supported Christina Kirschner. This work of governance based on compromise, pacts, and coalitions, suddenly became what I would call a management of paralysis. What Laclau is not able to account for is the powerful inertia in populist governments. It's precisely because of the very heterogeneity of the coalitions that Laclau and Mouffe valued them so much! It's important to remember these heterogeneous forces are not just progressive

movements such as Black and LGBTQ+ movements and so on. They also include *oligarchic* interests. For example, Perón himself was supported by the big farmers in Argentina. And we use populist strategies because we do not have the courage to insist on the necessity of revolutionary politics today.

SG: I think you're absolutely right, and we see this as well in the experience of SYRIZA in Greece. In the memorable words of Wolfgang Schäuble, "elections cannot be allowed to change economic policy."⁴ As I have argued in a recent article,⁵ the power of finance (i.e. the Troika) makes the social space somewhat less than "heterogeneous."

VS: If I can just say one more thing: I think that we should abandon the concept of "people" as a political concept. "People" is a provisional concept, not an essential one; a concept that, especially in the 19th century, was fundamentally bound up with the nation-state. And Marx didn't use the concept of "people" as a central political concept. He used a concept of "proletariat," and proletariat is precisely to be distinguished from "the people." For, let's remember, Marx and Engels said that the proletariat has no state, no family, no religion, no morality. And it wasn't a matter of giving the proletariat these things from some identarian perspective. The proletariat is entirely without predicates and this means it is a force of *negativity*, and this negativity is absolutely fundamental for the constitution of new political subjects. And, of course, a politics of negativity is simply not possible if the political subject is understood in terms of "the people."

SG: I think this is probably also helpful in explaining why the language of populism has become ever more important, and not just in recent years. The key book was *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in 1985 and this was the moment; Laclau was then working at Essex University and this was a couple of years after the defeat of the miners' strike. And I think this was not just a local, historical moment having to do with British society, but it was part and parcel of the project of neoliberalism—and this has some dimensions of fascism too, in terms of breaking independent working class organizations—and so, I would think that the language of the people has come back, precisely because it is so difficult in an era of globalization to imagine what the proletariat looks like. It goes to the heart of the question about how the proletariat really, today, is truly international, insofar as it is in a condition of—I don't like the Hardt-Negri thesis about the "multitude" very much but—of "exodus": the proletariat is in a

condition of exodus or withdrawal from “Empire.” The “multitude” is in the process of exiting the nation-state and is in a position of migrancy and exile. But it’s very difficult to think of how that class *in itself* could be transformed into a class *in and for itself*. What organizational structures could come into being, or maybe are already imminent that need to be developed, which could be turned into a force against empire?

VS: There are two things: the first one is that we should remember that the proletariat is not just a sociological concept, it is an ontological one. It’s very clear in Marx, and there is the sociological concept of a working poor class, constituted by the fact that, in being separated from the means of production, it has only its labour power, its capacity to labour, to sell as a commodity. There is also an ontological perspective, the *negative* constitution of the proletariat that stems from the Hegelian notion of subject, and this is, I think, a crucial dimension of Marx’s own thought. We cannot properly understand Marx without making this connection. Well, then of course, it is not a question of providing a sociological account of the proletariat but, rather, precisely because the proletariat is not a class, but that it constitutes the possible dissolution of class structure as such. The class struggle is not a struggle between the two classes. It is the struggle between a class, the bourgeoisie, and something that is not quite a class, the class beyond class—a class without predicates that can organize something as a class. I think this is an important point because it means that what we are trying to do is understand what exactly is meant by “proletarian condition.” And this goes back to our previous discussion about helplessness: what does it mean to understand a subject that accepts itself as its own dispossession as the very condition for action? I think this is a key question (and task) for political philosophy today.

SG: In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno calls *Das Kapital* the “phenomenology of the anti-spirit.” (Adorno 2004, 356). If the proletariat is the negation of the Hegelian form of spirit, it is then theorized as the anti-spirit, as that principle of negativity, which exposes the system in its totality as fundamentally contradictory. I think this is why it is absolutely so illegitimate for theories of intersectionality, for example, to talk about race, gender, sexual orientation, etc., etc., *and* class, as if class was something that required affirmation as opposed to that which poses the possibility in the form of the proletariat. This moment of negativity poses the possibility of its own self-disillusion, its own abolition.

VS: Sure. And then we can touch on the discussion about identitarianism because, of course, nobody is against the provisional use of identity as a strategy to show how society is based on violence and how to fight against it. This is absolutely important to identify the circuits of violence. And it is also absolutely important to show the structures of the most hegemonic and violent identitarianism that we know: the white one. But, the question for us, today, is that we are using it in an essentialist way—the notion of identity—and I think it is because the left is not able, anymore, to give another strong economic and political perspective so the only thing that we can change for society today is questions concerning recognition. These are important, of course, but it's easy to see that it feeds off a lack in the leftist thinking today.

SG: Yes, so figures like Walter Ben Michaels and Adolf Reed Jr. argue that advocates of identity politics don't mind when social groups and classes are excluded, only not on the basis of race, class, gender, etc. There's no criticism of the social totality, no criticism of the nature of social relations, *per se*, just a kind of argument against forms of social exclusion based on identity categories. So what we arguably see in identity politics is advocacy of the inclusion of certain groups into the bad infinity of capitalist social relations; it becomes a way in which neoliberal capitalism can present itself as "progressive."

VS: On this point, I would agree with Badiou: we don't need a politics of difference, we need a politics of *indifference*. This means the creation of zones of *indifference* where every conceivable difference could circulate. But, of course, for this to be possible, every difference would have to create a strong common field of solidarity and generic implication. And I think that this is an important point: why is it so difficult to create fields of generic implication in politics?

SG: I think that's a crucial question. Let's get back to discussing the advent of the Bolsonaro regime. As I mentioned, I think this conception of fascism that Samir Amin sketches is useful, and the reason I think it is useful is because it helps us think about the *differentia specifica* of fascisms globally. Amin's definition is twofold. Firstly, fascism responds not just to threat of revolution but, more generally, to a socioeconomic crisis. We've already established that neoliberalism is a condition of permanent crisis. So, we see the scene is already set for the rise of authoritarian trends and movements. The second aspect of his definition of fascism is that it deals with crisis by way of a categorical rejection of democracy, a rejection of formal

procedures, you could say (with Weber) legal-rational forms of authority, freedom of press, freedom of association, and so on. These all are displaced in favour of some notion of collective identity, cultural traditions, and so on—this is identity, or as the right calls it “identitarianism.” And, the embodiment and guardian of such cultural traditions and collective identities is a strong leader. The leader embodies a certain claim to what Adorno calls “authenticity,” and a conception of authenticity is really important, both on the right, as well as in left-wing identity politics. This is a way of dealing with the abstractions by which our lives are increasingly governed by providing a (false) sense of the concrete via an idealized or even mythological notion of “nation,” “community,” the “people,” and so on. This is something that I think lies deeply at the heart of neoliberalism, the rule of abstraction. So, we can see this working in terms of Modi, who makes an appeal to the Vedic tradition and Hinduism, producing a kind of reestablishment of caste and Islamophobia. You see this in Erdoğan’s invocation of a “Second Caliphate,” and you also see this, of course, in Trump’s invocation of this in his slogan: “Make American Great Again.” How can this framework be used to understand the last few years since 2013 or 2011 to the present in Brazil, and the emergence of a figure like Bolsonaro?

VS: Well, concerning the Brazilian situation, we should recognize that Brazil is a *traumatized* society. This is a society that dreamed of a future that we now know to be impossible; it was just a chimera. What results from this is trauma, the trauma of shock at our own impotence. And in this situation, of course, how does this discourse about order (articulated in slogans, for example, such as “I want my country back!”) play itself out? We can understand why, for a certain part of the society, this should be an important point. The other thing is that Brazil has a singular military history. If you take Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, they were able to deal with the military dictatorship: they put the torturers in jail. There are 1,000 people in jail today in Argentina linked to the military regime.

SG: It was a process of what Adorno called in an important lecture “Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit” (“What is the Meaning of Working Through the Past?”).⁶

VS: Yes, exactly. This rite of memories, this transitional justice, we had nothing of that here in Brazil, in contrast with those other South American cases. Not one torturer is in jail.

SG: That’s shocking!

VS: Yes. It is totally shocking because we had this idea: “it is not necessary. We can deal with that in a much more conciliatory way,” or “This would be much better for the country, etc.” The result is that, today, we have 40% of the government occupied by members of the Armed Forces, and we are really on the brink of a military *coup d'état*. We have this as a possible scenario. But there is another point too: this movement should be understood in terms of what I call a *preventative counter-revolution*.⁷

SG: Preventative counter-revolution? Interesting. Can you elaborate?

VS: Preventative counter-revolution means an anticipatory response to the real possibility of a radical social transformation. As I already mentioned, such a radical, social transformation was certainly not the project of Lula and the PT, but by an abandoned part of Brazilian society that said: “we don't want this political structure anymore. We don't want representation. We don't want to be represented.”

SG: So forces like the MST, the Landless Peasant's Movement, and other movements like that?

VS: No. What I'm talking about is a more spontaneous, social force. People who go out into the streets to say: “I don't want to be represented anymore!” This was a very important moment and this was a *latent* tendency that was waiting to become, as it were, *manifest* today.

SG: So the political and military elites were, or are, quite fearful of this possibility?

VS: Of course! This is very clear. They know that massive, social destabilization could happen in Brazil. A part of the left, now in Brazil, is trying to mobilize people saying, “look, our democracy is being destroyed; this government is destroying our democracy.” And this is an interesting point because in 2018, I, and other professors at my university, organized groups that were on the periphery working for the election. It was very interesting to see what happened when they came back because of two things. The first was the realization that if we had started this earlier, then history might have been quite different. Secondly, they said “when we go there saying things like, ‘Well, you know our democracy is at risk,’” normally, the people of the periphery say, “but, which democracy? What does “democracy” mean, exactly?!” And I can understand this claim because we essentially have a bourgeois democracy here, we have a democracy *for us* who are relatively well off, but if you go to the favelas...

SG: In the favelas? Forget it!

I'm very interested in what you were saying that there have been increasing attempts to build bridges between intellectuals—and also with students, perhaps—and the masses. This leads to some questions about the role, and also the fate, of the university. I came here to teach for a week and had decided to come a few months ago, prior to the presidential election. Immediately in the run-up to the election, probably a week and a half or two weeks before voting day, there were reports about police entering classrooms and pulling down posters and so on. This I found extremely alarming and, existentially, one doesn't know quite what to expect. But, also, more generally, the autonomy of the university is very important, politically, and questions of academic freedom, which is so closely tied to the autonomy of the university, seem to be deeply under threat. We can see this in Turkey, in India, we see it in the United States, and also in my country, Canada. And not just from the right, but also from the left. Academic freedom is also something that the left seems to think is kind of expendable: "academic freedom for us, but not for them." It's not defended, really, as a principle. So how would you understand the future of the university, the role of philosophy, and the humanities in general?

VS: Academic freedom is important, but only if we actually pose a danger to the state and the exiting power structure. For example, in May '68, it was the first time when the universities were involved in popular struggles. This means that we were able to create a situation in which the state trembled. Then, the result was that they needed to deal with us. But now, the university is not much of a danger for anybody. Then why are they not properly funding universities? I mean, especially the humanities? Because universities are hardly required for the professionalization of the population. For this, a two-year course will suffice.

SG: Technical schools?

VS: Technical schools and two or three big centres of research, that's all. It's true, in the neoliberal perspective, universities have no real role to play any longer. They will demonstrate this for us this time next year when they will really try to close all those other departments, and they will say, "well, you produce nothing, etc." Then I think we can pose another question. The intellectual class, the academic class, believes that they have no force, that they have no place anymore. And this was the biggest mistake because, in a certain way, this is cynical—

it's cynical to say something like, "okay, I don't want to lead or direct." I don't want to be this type of intellectual that leads the masses, and so on and so forth (in French, *dirigisme*). But, they say "I will be here, in my office, seeing everything. I will write wonderful papers about your social movements, about the things that you are doing in the street, but I'm here, okay? You know? I'm here, if you need something call me, no problem."

But, of course, you know that this is practical for us, no? This is not the thing that society expects of us because it is not a question of leadership, it is a question of being together. We should be together, and being together means there are things that I don't know how to do: I don't know how to shoot, I don't know how to craft slogans. But there are things that I do know how to do, and I know that this is important. For example, one thing is that the movements appear concretely, in a very concrete process; the other thing is to be able to create resonance with certain events. It's not just a question of interpretation, it is a question of giving new powers, generating new force for the process. And this is the important part that the intellectuals can play. An intellectual is a type of professional of resonances.

SG: Okay. Then I'd just like to finish with a final question, which is it seems as if the necessity to think about resistance and transformation is extremely urgent. You have somebody in power now who has praised the military regime—as has been widely discussed—but also who has criticized it for not being brutal enough: "They should have murdered 30,000 people when they had the opportunity." Hateful statements about women and gay people and so on. We all know this. To some extent, this is rhetoric, but on the other hand, it's not. The rhetoric has to be taken very seriously as existential threats because his main target, *really*, is the left. It seems as if, like the right populism of the past, he is fighting the Cold War with a phantom enemy now. There isn't a communist threat in the way that there might have been—it might have been possible to conceive of this in the context of the Cold War—but today, it's not credible. So, you have situations in which members and leaders of the MST, the landless workers movement, are being killed. You have the figure, John Wyllys, the openly-gay Brazilian congressman who fled the country amidst death threats. I've already described what has happened in the universities, which was very intimidating. This seems to be a really dangerous moment. If you could talk about how you regard that yourself, as a very prominent public intellectual—not just a university professor—who will no doubt be targeted? What are your

thoughts about the immediacy of this threat, whether, as under the military dictatorship, which your parents experienced, going underground is something that will become a necessity? The third dimension of the question would be, then, what would a resistance look like? What form will it take? And, maybe, thinking a little bit about the role of intellectuals, academics, and so on, what forms of transnational solidarity can be helpful? I mean, it's something we want to think about.

VS: Well, I think that we always knew that this battle would come. We knew that our democracy was much more fragile than some people would have liked to believe. Our democracy was built not on *forgiveness*, but in the *forgetting*. But maybe we are just opening a new era where, for the first time in our history, we are obliged to assume that we are a divided society, that we have *nothing* in common because we were not able to create a common history about our past, about our violent past? I think that there are some moments in which societies must accept the reality of such divisions. Understanding these divisions can create a new situation and I think that, especially in the Brazilian reality, we have tried, as I was alluding to earlier, every possible way of reconciliation—every way of, and every path of, repairing the social bond imaginable. And now we are in this dreadful situation. But for us, there is no social bond anymore, there is no reconciliation anymore, and we must be prepared for that. I don't know what will happen, how far state violence can go. But this is not important now, especially because, as professors, we are in a very privileged situation. We have all these international contacts and so on, but the ordinary people that don't have that. . . they will really be the ones to suffer.

If we have a moral obligation now, it is to stay here, to stay with the people and to fight alongside them. What can we expect of international solidarity? I think, for example, with these things that we are doing now, people try to understand what is happening in Brazil—this is new for us. Actually, Brazil has always been a very strange country because it is a massive country and possesses an important culture; we have 45% of all the Latin American GDP, but, all the same, the country is unknown. Normally, with one or two exceptions, nobody reads our authors; nobody really knows our history. It's not like Russia, China, or India, which possess higher degrees of visibility; Brazil is kind of an invisible country. We know some things: some caricatures, or some stereotypes. What is less well known is that we have a very long history

of debates, of fights, of struggles, and the Brazilian university was always present in that. We have a strong tradition of public intellectuals.

I think one interesting thing is that what has happened here doesn't concern just Brazil. I mean, we are really in the position of a laboratory for a global model of neoliberalism now because, if this works here, they will try to implement the same model. Firstly, in the rest of Latin America because—keeping in mind a little bit of the history of dictatorships in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s—it starts with Brazil and then it goes to Argentina, Chile...

SG: A kind of negative learning process, as it were?

VS: Exactly, because the importance of Brazil in this area is really big, which then spreads to other parts of the globe. Then we will have two models: an oligarchy with a human face, maybe in Europe, Canada, the United States, and this remains to be seen; and fascist neoliberalism in the rest of the world. This, of course, is the worst scenario that you can imagine.

SG: Shortly after Bolsonaro's victory, the liberal, Canadian media said that, while he may be an authoritarian, his conversion to market fundamentalism would create welcome investment opportunities particularly in the resource sector. This is why it's so important for us to grasp what's happening here, but this is also probably why people are increasingly paying attention to Brazil and will no doubt continue to do so in the future. I think people are also very concerned about the environmental implications of the plan to develop, quite aggressively, the entire Amazon Basin (which has been described as the "lungs of the planet") and this means a violent form of development that will completely displace Indigenous populations. This is bad, and suggests the possibility of what you called this a new, more brutal form of neoliberalism and that seems to be one dimension of its genocidal aspect. But, the other aspect, of course, is the worsening of climate change, which will produce its own form of massive violence, perhaps even worse than genocide—*ecocide*.

VS: Yes, of course!

SG: A bit of a somber note to end on, but thank you nonetheless!

VS: Well, thank you!

Notes

1] We would like to thank the editors of this journal, in particular Thijs Lijster, for their extremely valuable critical feedback and helpful suggestions. We are also grateful to Mr. Maxwell Kristen for transcribing the recording of the interview and Ms. Huyen Pham for copy-editing.

2] This term was first introduced by Canadian writer, Douglas Coupland, in his novel *Generation X* and referred to “the increasing gulf between the rich and the poor and the accompanying disappearance of the middle class.” It was subsequently taken up by a number of writers including the American conservative writer, Michael Lind, who spoke of the “Brazilification of the United States” and the German sociologist of risk society, Ulrich Beck. For Beck, risk entails the institutional inability to predict and address the myriad effects of industrial societies. The globalization of such risk, in his view, leads to the “Brazilification of the West” or the combination of increasingly precarious forms of employment and ever diminishing social welfare provision. See the useful discussion in Uluorta (2009).

3] Quoted in Selwyn (2015)

4] Quoted in Varoufakis (2017): Chapter 8.

5] See Gandesha (2019)

6] See Adorno (1998)

7] This is more fully discussed in Safatle’s chapter in Gandesha (2020): 179–190.

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