

What Comes After Depression? The Crisis of Neoliberal Subjectivity and the New Authoritarian Wave in Brazil

Arthur Bueno

Krisis 41 (1): 45-64.

Abstract

This article advances the idea that recent political events in Brazil – and possibly elsewhere – can be seen to express a crisis not only of the social order institutionalised in the past decades but also of its corresponding form of subjectivity: namely, that of a neoliberal ‘entrepreneur of the self’ whose experiences of psychological malaise came to be predominantly conceived of in terms of depression. It is in this sense that one may speak of a ‘post-depressive constellation’: a situation in which the social psychological tensions of the depressive order have reached a peak, leading to a variety of reactions and struggles but not yet to the establishment of a new consensus and a stable institutional framework. Two kinds of political process, in particular, can be understood as moments of such a constellation: ‘post-depressive effervescence’ (as it has emerged in key moments of the ‘Journeys of June’) and ‘post-depressive authoritarianism’ (which has progressively gained traction from the 2013 demonstrations to the 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro).

Keywords

Crisis, Neoliberalism, Depression, Authoritarianism, Effervescence.

DOI

[10.21827/krisis.41.1.37167](https://doi.org/10.21827/krisis.41.1.37167)

Licence

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). © 2021 The author(s).

What Comes After Depression? The Crisis of Neoliberal Subjectivity and the New Authoritarian Wave in Brazil

Arthur Bueno

Introduction

At this point, few if any observers would consider it exaggerated to characterize Brazil's recent political life as marked by permanent turmoil. An undeniable milestone in this process were the demonstrations of June 2013: in the wake of the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, and in anticipation of a series of protests that would later surface in other parts of the world, the 'Journeys of June' signalled a decisive political shift in the country. A striking feature of this event, also shared by many of these other protests, was its initial political indeterminacy. Millions of people from a variety of social and political backgrounds went out to the streets and took part in a widespread, intense, and diffuse revolt against the political system as a whole. What had begun as a local protest, organised by an autonomist group against the rising prices of public transportation, progressively gained momentum until it turned, in rapid escalation, into a generalised revolt featuring a wide variety of political claims. At their peak, the 2013 demonstrations were marked by the pervasive feeling – well captured by one of the placards which became famous at the time – that “There are so many things wrong that they don't fit one placard.”

Yet in the months and years that followed, this rather vague political force took on progressively consolidated forms in the course of an oscillating dynamic between moments of polarized struggle between different social groups and situations of distention or new indeterminacy. It suffices to list some of these moments to give an idea of the intensity of Brazil's political life after June 2013. Since then, a federal investigation against corruption, the Operation Car Wash, came to target powerful economic and political actors – in particular leading figures of Lula's and Dilma Rousseff's governments – and became a source of permanent struggle and legal instability. In 2014, President Rousseff (PT) was re-elected amid questioning of the election's legitimacy by her opponent in the second round, Aécio Neves (PSDB), and only two years later, after a long series of mass demonstrations from both sides, she was removed from office by the National Congress. The government of her former vice president, Michel Temer (PMDB, later MDB) – supported by a plethora of political forces comprising

both earlier supporters and oppositionists of Rousseff's administration – then came to experience the lowest rates of popularity of recent decades amidst an economic crisis deepened by the enforcement of austerity policies and ongoing corruption scandals prompted by the Operation Car Wash. The country later saw former President Lula be charged by the same criminal investigation and taken to prison in 2018, thus preventing him from running for office at a moment when polls indicated his possible victory. It witnessed in the same year the assassination of the politician and human rights activist Marielle Franco (PSOL), who had successfully made her way from the favelas to become city councillor of Rio de Janeiro. Finally, it witnessed the political rise and presidential election of Jair Bolsonaro (then member of the PSL, now without a party), a congressman historically linked to the defence of the military dictatorship (1964-1985) and to members of paramilitary forces (known as 'militia') currently suspected of involvement in the murder of Marielle Franco. A few days after the election Bolsonaro nominated Sérgio Moro – the federal judge who convicted Lula and was a central figure of the Operation Car Wash – as Minister of Justice.

In half a decade, Brazil's political life thus oscillated from the diffuse and quite ambivalent enthusiasm of June 2013 to an increasing ideological polarization which culminated in the election of Jair Bolsonaro. It was in the midst of this process that a 'new right' was seen to emerge and assumed a hitherto unprecedented role in the country's political struggles. While right-wing discourses and practices have deep roots in Brazilian society, their presence continuing throughout the transition from the military dictatorship to the 'New Republic' established by the 1988 Constitution (Pierucci 1987, 1989), from 2013 on they took centre stage and came to be explicitly encamped by a myriad of social movements, assuming more ideologically marked as well as more combative forms. A neo-conservatism emerged, then, that no longer manifested itself predominantly in a diffuse depoliticization and taken-for-granted practices (as those carried out by state apparatuses such as the police and the army, both still largely structured along the authoritarian directives of the dictatorship period), but rather through the articulation of relatively coherent ideological discourses and a variety of organized struggles for hegemony: against communism and 'cultural Marxism', against feminism and 'gender ideology', against quota-based distributive policies and in favour of 'meritocracy', for nationalism but also for the radicalization of neoliberal economic policies, for more permissive

gun laws and even for a novel ‘military intervention’ (Cruz et al. 2015; Telles 2015; Chaloub & Perlatto 2016; Messenberg 2017; Solano 2018; Rocha 2019a).

This was not the outcome of an unambiguous development. While one of the striking features of the 2013 protests was the unequivocal return of the (far) right to the streets, the ‘Journeys of June’ also gave new impetus to a variety of left-wing movements: feminist, anti-racist, LGBTQI+, for public education and the right to the city, among others (Maricato et al. 2013; Facchini and Rodrigues 2017; Medeiros and Fanti 2019; Medeiros et al. 2019). These diverging tendencies can, however, be meaningfully grasped as part of one and the same process insofar as they are considered against the backdrop of a general crisis of Brazilian democracy which has given new form to its social struggles. Such a crisis has certainly many dimensions: it can be analysed as an effect of distributive conflicts between different social classes and groups (Braga 2017; Singer 2018), as well as in terms of a progressive delegitimization of the political system in relation to the demands of society (Nobre 2013b). Yet some of its aspects cannot be sufficiently understood, I contend, without taking into account the social psychological structure on which the previous political order was based, and which can also be seen as having entered into crisis. The political events of the past years, including the rise of the new right, may then come to appear as manifold reactions to the subjective tensions inherent to the institutional arrangement in force before the 2013 protests. From such a perspective we are dealing not only with the crisis of a social-political order, but also of a corresponding form of subjectivity: one, as I will argue in this essay, for which experiences of psychological *malaise* came to be predominantly conceived of in terms of depression.

The Entrepreneurial-Depressive Subject

The turn to the twenty-first century took place largely under the sign of depression. The “noon-day demon,” as Andrew Solomon referred to it in his 2001 best-seller, appeared not only to afflict ever-larger portions of the population but also to symbolize some of the most pressing problems of contemporary life. More than to just mark the spread of an individual illness, the rapid rise in the rates of depression was seen to constitute an index of major social transformations occurring after the Second World War, and especially since the 1960s. Psychological suffering seemed, then, no longer to be predominantly displayed in the classical neurotic symptoms of Freud’s time, but rather in feelings of exhaustion, emptiness, and an inability to act

(Ehrenberg 2010 [1998]). While Freudian neurosis consisted in an illness of *guilt* in which the subject felt torn between the permitted and the forbidden, the authority of the law and the force of repressed drives, depression can be described as an illness of *inadequacy* in which everything is apparently allowed but one feels nevertheless unable to measure up to the full range of available possibilities. “If, as Freud thought, ‘a person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him,’ he becomes depressed because he must tolerate the illusion that everything is possible for him” (ibid., 232). Split between the possible and the impossible, the endlessly available and what one is actually able to accomplish, the depressed individual is a person ‘out of gas:’ “Tired and empty, restless and violent – in short, nervous – we feel the weight of our individual sovereignty” (ibid., 9).

This shift from neurosis to depression in clinical diagnoses was considered by many the sign of a new social order: one in which individuals came to be faced with ever stronger requirements of self-responsibility and authentic self-realization – the demand of ‘being oneself’ or, as suggested by a popular self-help book, one’s *Best Self: Be You, Only Better* – in a context of declining social support and escalating inequality, competition, and precarity (Boltanski and Chiapello 2017 [1998]; Sennett 1998; Honneth 2004 [2002]). As a result of an ‘elective affinity’ between the development of a financialized, Post-Fordist regime of accumulation and the diffusion of Romantic and aesthetic ideals of personal authenticity, a ‘new individualism’ was seen to emerge in which disciplinary obedience gave way to entrepreneurial initiative (Bröckling 2016 [2007]; Dardot and Laval 2014 [2010]). Rather than being guided (and constrained) by universal and broadly fixed patterns of rationality, this new subject would be driven by the possibility of (and demand for) continuously sustaining a singular, authentic life: one that is both self-discovered and experimentally created, emotionally communicative and flexibly adapted to ever-changing market conditions (Reckwitz 2017).

If the role model of such a society is represented by the neoliberal ‘entrepreneur of the self’ in search for both authenticity and success, its antitype is nothing other than the depressive subject:

“When the enterprise becomes a life-form – a *Lebensführung*, as Weber would have put it – the multiplicity of choices to be made on a daily basis, the incitement to continual risk-taking, and the constant encouragement of personal capitalization are liable to entail a ‘weariness of the self’ in the long run” (Dardot and Laval 2014 [2010], 292).

The depressive individual marks the point at which the requirement of being an entrepreneur of the self becomes subjectively problematic: when the prospect of authentic self-realization turns into emptiness and exhaustion, when the search for self-determination ends up in a sense of alienation (Rosa 2016; Jaeggi 2016). Oscillating between the entrepreneur of the self and its depressive counterpoint, social experience then takes the form of a ‘frantic stagnation:’ the perception that one must keep moving forward and trying harder – at ever faster rates, preferably faster than the others – without actually feeling one is going anywhere (Rosa 2013 [2005], 2011; Bueno 2020).

Autonomy and Authenticity

More than just a clinical diagnosis, depression has thus become a keyword for various kinds of subjective failure with regard to normative expectations institutionalized in the last decades of the twentieth century. As a result of the shift of emphasis from discipline and norm-conformity to individual initiative and self-discovered identity, two central problems of modernity – the interrelated perils of lack of autonomy and lack of authenticity – have come to take on specific forms. Instead of proving themselves as autonomous beings by asserting capacities they possess as *general* members of the human species, individuals have increasingly attempted to do so by employing creative forces that make them appear as *singular* with regard to others (Reckwitz 2017). It is in this respect that depression represents, as Ehrenberg (2003) emphasized, a ‘disease of autonomy.’ Now, by virtue of the same process, depression can also be interpreted as a ‘disease of authenticity.’ Whereas subjects would once seek self-realization by referring to a *core personality* conceived of as intimate, even unfathomable, and as such largely held apart from public scrutiny, they have come to do so more and more by the success-oriented mobilization of personal, affective capacities viewed as both *open to transformation and permeable to external evaluation*: they are ‘invented’ as much as ‘discovered’ (Honneth 2004 [2002]).

This form of subjectivity is thus more porous than the one studied by Freud. The cumulative questioning of the opposition between the forbidden and the permitted, with all the drive repression it implied, opened the way for a form of subjectivity for which the distinctions between the public and the private, the impersonal and the personal, the general and the singular, also became increasingly permeable. Not without reason, this development was largely perceived as a liberating one: it allowed, in principle, a less inhibited expression and experimentation of one's own singularity, as well as a less cold and detached attitude in dealings with others. And yet, the same condition requires the individual to become a full-time entrepreneur. The conflict between the forbidden and the allowed not only implied the continuous repression of one's innermost drives, but also offered a protective barrier, the reservation of a space of intimacy. With the weakening of that conflict, the individual's subjection to the market – now constituted as a general model of social relations – occurs in an almost unmediated manner. The seemingly unlimited possibilities of experimentation opened for one's self-determination and self-realization are possibilities conceived of in market terms.

Inasmuch as capitalism incorporated the Romantic and aesthetic critiques of modernity, the *extrinsic* conflict between the impersonal and the personal, the rational and the affective, the general and the singular, has thus become an *intrinsic* tension in which these dimensions are confused – a tension which, for that very reason, often goes unnoticed. The promise of entrepreneurial subjectivity is that success in markets of all kinds would immediately lead to the realization of a self-determined subject meaningfully connected with oneself and the world. The modern notion that the increasing accumulation of resources leads to the good life (cf. Rosa 2017) finds here its most developed form: in principle, there is no personal impulse or value that could not be converted or appropriated in market-like relationships. Markets are personalized, personal life is marketized. And yet, the experience of the depressed individual reveals the limits and psychosocial costs of continually maintaining such an expectation.

Such a social configuration – which we may designate metonymically as the *depressive society* – is pervaded by escalating tensions, and yet managed to maintain a considerable degree of stability in the past decades. So much so that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, this institutional arrangement seemed by its very logic to hinder the articulation of depressive symptoms and associated forms of psychological malaise in terms of explicit political claims and

organized social struggles (cf. Honneth 2000; 2009 [2004]). Today, however, the pressures of this order have intensified to such an extent that its persistence appears to be seriously compromised: it does not seem possible to remain for much longer in a state of frantic stagnation. From the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street, from June 2013 in Brazil to the *gilets jaunes* in France, from Brexit to the elections of Trump and Bolsonaro, many political events of our time suggest an exhaustion of the social configuration which had been stabilized in recent decades. They equally seem to indicate an exhaustion of the forms of subjectivity which came to prevail in that order. It is in this regard that I suggest we speak of a *post-depressive constellation*: a situation in which the social psychological tensions of the depressive order have reached a peak, leading to a variety of reactions and struggles but not yet to the establishment of a new consensus and a stable institutional framework.

Depressive Brazil

While the emergence of this configuration can be taken to consist in a global phenomenon, it has assumed a specific form in Brazilian society. As mentioned above, since 2013 the country's political life has been marked by intense social struggles and ongoing institutional disruptions in a context marked by a deepening economic crisis. This situation contrasts sharply with the decade that preceded it: during Lula's two presidential mandates (2003-2010) and the first two years of Rousseff's government (2011-2012), Brazil experienced a period of economic growth, mitigation of extreme poverty, and relative social ascension by the lower classes to such a degree that for many a "new middle class" (Neri 2008) or, more accurately, a "new working class" (Pochmann 2012; Singer 2012) had emerged. This was a time of rising expectations, and one then had the impression that, as stated on the cover of a 2009 edition of *The Economist*, Brazil was "taking off."

Yet those incipient forms of social progress not only relied on specific economic conditions (e.g., the 2000s' commodities boom, larger public investment in infrastructure, and a raise in consumption due to the expansion of distributive policies (cf. Carvalho [2018])) but were also bounded by a political configuration characteristic of the country's New Republic: one in which demands for social inclusion were counteracted by, and had to be constantly negotiated with, the interests of well-established actors. Particularly significant in this regard was a bundle of powerful yet ideologically loose political parties, epitomized by the PMDB and largely

symbiotic with the state apparatus, as well as an economic elite whose financial profits increasingly depended on the enforcement of neoliberal policies. On this basis, one can describe such a period in terms of an “immobility in motion” (Nobre 2013a): i.e., an ongoing and conflictual adjustment between a ‘social developmental’ consensus welcoming the expansion of rights, on the one hand, and a political-economic core functioning as a veto system and imposing ever-renewed barriers to those demands, on the other.

This conflictual arrangement also explains other important features of that period. As a new working class gained strength and voice, labour conditions turned increasingly precarious and social ascension came to be predominantly understood in terms of a competition for individual self-realization and success (Braga 2012). Such a tendency was equally expressed in the dissemination of forms of conspicuous consumption framed by discourses of personal authenticity emphasizing not only inter-class but also, and perhaps most significantly, intra-class competition (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco 2014; Caldeira 2014). Something similar applies to the role played by evangelical neo-Pentecostal churches, whose cultural importance grew steadily in that period: here again, the path to social ascension and improvement of one’s life was largely understood as relying on a charismatic connection to God conceived as both leading to, and being attested by, the individual’s effort and success in the world (Côrtes 2018).

A new subjectivity thus emerged in this period: one that presents considerable similarities – also important differences – with the type of subject highlighted by those analyses of depression formulated in the context of the richer countries of the West and, for the most part, of their middle classes. The precarious worker, the ascending consumer, the enthusiastic believer, the threatened member of the middle class, even the rich wary of its social standing – all these can be seen to constitute different versions of an ‘entrepreneur of the self’ eager to explore the full range of available possibilities to affirm their autonomy through individual initiative as well as to find authenticity in the creation of a successful ‘best self.’ Yet, as the Brazilian case also shows, such attempts cannot but face limitations intrinsic to the order in which they emerge: namely, those manifested in a sense of intensified individual competition as well as in the perception that one’s attempts to succeed come to be blocked, again and again, by apparently insurmountable powers ‘from above.’ It is precisely to those limitations that many political processes and movements of the past years, despite their differences, can be seen to

have responded. And it is in this sense that they may be grasped as particular moments of a broader ‘post-depressive constellation.’

The Politics of Exhaustion

The pertinence of such an account can be founded, I shall argue, on the fact that the forms of social struggle and political action which have become prominent in the past years may be meaningfully interpreted as reactions to two central features of the depressive order, two interconnected sources of its ‘frantic stagnation.’ Both refer to tensions which, as we have seen, are inherent to entrepreneurial-depressive individuality.

With regard to the issue of *autonomy*, the promise of this form of subjectivity is that one would reach self-determination through entrepreneurial initiative: by offering an innovative product in one of the various markets of which social life is comprised, one would be in a position to leave one’s personal mark on them and transform them in one’s image and likeness. Yet the repeated failure in fulfilling this promise (due to the highly unequal workings of these markets and the often precarious condition of those entrepreneurs) rather leads to a strong sense of heteronomy. It is clear that many political movements of our times build on the widespread dissatisfaction with a social order that has largely presented itself as unavoidable. The dictum “There Is No Alternative” not only served to legitimize neoliberal economic policies adopted to varying degrees by governments on the right and the left, but also presented an eloquent expression of the way in which subjects came to relate to social institutions in general, many of which were reshaped in the image and likeness of the ‘laws of the market.’ One of its political consequences was a significant limitation of popular participation and a widespread sense of closure of the political system in relation to society – a perception that could only become more acute in a context of rising inequality and failed responses to economic crises. It does not come as a surprise, then, that several movements of our time manifest a marked resentment towards the ruling elites and claims for more participation: they can, indeed, be seen to constitute a reaction to the *fatalism* of the prevailing forms of social regulation.

But contemporary political processes can also be viewed as reactions to another feature of the depressive order. Entrepreneurial subjectivity also relies on the notion that there is an inextricable link between market success and *authenticity*: the achievement of a meaningful relationship with oneself and the world would be attested immediately through competition in markets

of all kinds, where the individual is supposed to explore their innermost impulses, to discover and invent one's (best) self. And yet, this perspective can only be maintained to the extent that its internal tensions remain hidden: in particular, the tension between the promise of authentic connection with others and the structuration of social life as a market-like competition between atomized individuals, each of whom is held responsible for its own success and self-realization (a notion that was, again, synthesized by one of Thatcher's mottos: "There is no such thing as society"). However, the demand that each person should be a self-sufficient individual has resulted in growing feelings of isolation and social fragmentation. The fact that the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* incorporated aspects of the Romantic ideal of authentic self-discovery did not mitigate those negative effects. Rather, it raised the stakes and was bound to increase the frustration of those who cannot fulfil the demands of achieving success and 'being oneself.' Such a feeling could only become more acute as social benefits were gradually removed and larger parts of the population found themselves in a situation of precarity and uncertainty. It does not come as a surprise, then, that several political movements of our time manifest a desire for experiences of affective communion: they can be seen to constitute, in this regard, a reaction to the prevailing forms of social *disintegration*.

Typical of the post-depressive situation are hence forms of political struggle which respond to the tensions of the depressive society in ways that point, at least potentially, towards the constitution of a different social order. The realization of those unfulfilled promises is, to a great extent, no longer sought in the framework of the entrepreneurial-depressive subjectivity, but rather by attempts to move beyond it. Depressive exhaustion has itself, so to speak, come to a point of exhaustion. And yet, the post-depressive situation is not characterized by a single cohesive form of political action or organization. What connects its many, often contradictory, expressions is rather the fact that they can all be seen as responses to the escalating tensions of the depressive society. We are dealing not so much with a new order as with a new constellation, a set of different reactions and political stances. Two of the latter have become prominent in the past years and are crucial for understanding recent political processes in Brazil. The first consists in what I suggest designating as 'post-depressive effervescence.'

Post-Depressive Effervescence

The 2013 demonstrations in Brazil, as with many of the political uprisings of the 2010s, were marked in their decisive moments by experiences of affective immersion in a vaguely structured collectivity, as well as by the absence of clearly defined goals. These two features are crucial for understanding why they can be seen as expressions of a post-depressive situation: it was due to, and not in spite of, their normative and affective vagueness that those uprisings could be perceived as powerful contestations of the predominant social order. The political indeterminacy of these movements, for which they were so often criticized, was also the basis of their appeal: it allowed for a sense of togetherness based on the participation in a shared affective atmosphere, an experience that could appear as a counterpoint to the competitive atomization of the depressive order. A decisive moment in the 2013 demonstrations in Brazil occurred when, on June 17, a protest initially prompted by the high cost of public transportation and propelled by an anarchist group, the Free Fare Movement (MPL), was joined both on the streets and in digital social networks by millions of people who, coming from multiple social and political backgrounds, protested for an equally wide diversity of political aims (Nobre 2013b; Alonso and Mische 2016). As if from one moment to the next, everything that drew these multiple actors apart no longer seemed to hold. In the words of one of the protesters:

On that day I saw a lot of people arriving with the Brazilian flag, some organized groups distributing Brazilian flags, anarchists, black blocs, people from PSOL, from the Workers' Party... I thought: 'There are a lot of people here that hate each other, and they are all together.' During the demonstration, I felt that that was really beautiful. When I came home, I saw that some people were worried, writing on Facebook: 'let's get out of the streets,' 'the right is trying to co-opt,' 'we're losing focus.' But actually, I came home feeling delighted.¹

These statements capture well the general atmosphere of that day: an excited feeling of togetherness, a sense that social and political differences were no longer irreconcilable but rather could give rise to a sort of affective unity established in and out of diversity (Moraes et al. 2014). This is crucial for understanding the thrust of that movement as well as why it could be felt as a reaction to the prevailing forms of social fragmentation. In contrast to the self-sufficiency of the self-entrepreneur and the isolation of the depressive subject, the experience of

finding oneself on the streets with a multitude of people was felt by many as an affectively *liberating* or ‘cathartic’ one (Bringel and Pleyers 2015).

Now, it is clear that this (rather indeterminate) sense of affective togetherness arose in connection with, and was premised on, the confrontation with a common (yet also quite roughly defined) antagonist: the political system, prevailing institutions, *tudo isso que está aí* (“all that is there”). The experience of collective effervescence was made possible, as well as intensified, by its conjunction with radical, if momentary, challenges to established norms and corresponding claims for more direct or substantive political participation (Mendonça 2018). Confrontations with the police, blockages of the streets, occupations of public institutions: suddenly, life no longer seemed to be constrained by a set of immutable, fatal, laws. Rather, one felt that the collectivity would from then on establish its own norms, that the population would exert its constituent power. As expressed by one of the protesters:

Someone called us and said: ‘They are invading the National Congress.’ I felt a very high adrenaline, as if a Bastille would fall down on that day. That is why I went to the Palace of Bandeirantes [*head office of the São Paulo state government*]. I thought: ‘If they are going to remove the governor by force, I want at least to see that.’²

In contrast to the self-entrepreneur’s adaptation to pre-given norms and the depressive subject’s feeling of impotence, the experience of challenging the established order could give one the sense that they regained the capacity for effective collective *self-determination*, the possibility of actively participating in the construction of social institutions.

Such moments have proven to be, however, inherently unstable. Soon the perception arose that this sense of togetherness is made of heterogeneous elements which are not easily reconcilable; soon those involved realized that their normative standpoints can lead to radically different political arrangements. A new set of tensions derived precisely from the normative vagueness and affective indeterminacy of these movements. They marked the beginning of struggles concerning the political meaning and institutional articulation of that intense yet quite ambivalent collective experience.

In the early stages of the Journeys of June one could, indeed, already notice the emergence of conflicting stances regarding the political significance of the protests. Each of these positions

can be discerned as a specific response to the practical challenges posed by such disrupting events. There were those, for instance, who claimed that the demonstrations should be further pursued precisely in the shape in which they had initially presented themselves: as an overall rupture with prevailing norms in tandem with the sustenance of a vague and affectively charged ‘common.’ Such was the position defended by several of those associated with the autonomist movements that had taken the front line of the demonstrations (cf. Pelbart 2013; Moraes et al. 2014). For their part, many sectors of the centre-left closer to the Workers’ Party considered the political indeterminacy of the Journeys of June – which had not only paved the way for an insurgence against PT administrations but also for a return of the (far) right to the streets – as a risk to democratic institutions and the social achievements of the Lula and Rousseff governments (cf. Souza 2016). In doing so, however, they could not avoid appearing as advocates of a political-social order whose normative fatalism and affective disintegration were precisely being challenged.

Other political groups also criticized the institutional rupture caused by the protests and advocated a return to the previous social configuration, yet not so much with a view to expanding social rights but rather to intensifying market-friendly policies already underway. This was the position assumed by centre-right parties such as the PSDB and the MDB (later made explicit in the proposal of a ‘Bridge to the Future’ presented in the first days of Temer’s government) as well as by new right-wing movements that emerged in the wake of the protests, e.g., the Free Brazil Movement (MBL) (cf. Rocha 2019b). Others still, while seeking to retain the affective intensity and sense of togetherness which irrupted in the Journeys of June, claimed that such a state could only be secured and stabilized within a novel institutional order: one supposed to guarantee social and normative cohesion by repressive means and which would represent, in many regards, a rupture with the New Republic founded by the 1988 Constitution (cf. Messenberg 2017). This is a crucial feature of the far right that gained traction in the wake of the 2013 demonstrations and came to assume over the years a leading role in the country’s politics.

Post-Depressive Authoritarianism

Brazil's political history since 2013 may, then, be understood in terms of an ongoing struggle between the normative-affective horizons projected by these stances as well as their combinations. While Rousseff's re-election in 2014 represented a momentary victory for the centre-left proposal of gradual expansion of social inclusion as had been pursued in previous years (even if, at this point, implying an even greater commitment to the neoliberal programme of fiscal austerity), during her government a series of mass protests followed which were no longer marked by the political indeterminacy of the Journeys of June but rather by a stronger polarization between the right and the left or, more specifically, between those against and those for Rousseff's impeachment. With her removal from office in 2016, a new administration led by President Michel Temer (MDB) ensued which explicitly aimed at the enforcement of a radicalized programme of neoliberal austerity reforms. Yet, rather than taming the political-economic crisis that had developed in previous years, this process led to its intensification. The sense of growing affective disintegration – manifested most visibly in the polarization between political claims which appeared as ultimately irreconcilable – then came to be accompanied by a significant loss of legitimacy of the institutional order, with the increasing perception that the latter would no more than express the particular interests of powerful actors and their interplay. It is in this context that far-right movements which had surfaced in the Journeys of June – if then only with a marginal role – gained momentum until they culminated in the election of Bolsonaro in 2018. One can interpret the recent rise of the far right as part of a post-depressive constellation to the extent that this process may be seen as a reaction to the intensification of the democratic crisis in the aftermath of Rousseff's impeachment and during Temer's government: a crisis characterized by a feeling of affective disintegration and radicalization of social conflicts on the one hand, and an acute delegitimization of the normative-institutional order, on the other.

The growing perception of social fragmentation may explain why, similarly to what had occurred in the Journeys of June, the recent rise of the new right has been characterized by intense expectations of affective communion. The 2015 and 2016 protests against Rousseff's government which led to her impeachment were, in fact, marked by states of collective excitement reminiscent of those of the 2013 demonstrations. Yet they also differed in important regards.

Even while bringing together a variety of positions across the political spectrum, the protests against Rousseff took place in a context of intensifying ideological polarization and were more clearly right-wing demonstrations. Hence they not only helped to create some form of unified action on the part of the right but also consolidated the far right as a relevant political actor: amidst the millions of people who rallied against corruption wearing the colours of the national flag, one could hear not only warnings against the alleged ‘communism’ of the Workers’ Party and the threat posed by ‘gender ideology’ for the preservation of traditional family values, but also acclamations of the military dictatorship (1964-1985) and demands for a novel ‘military intervention.’

In a sense, then, the experience of being immersed in a heterogeneous multitude gave way here to more uniform and exclusionary conceptions of (national) communion. Rather than the political expression of a multiple and indeterminate ‘common,’ as was at least momentarily the case in the Journeys of June, these protests largely vocalized the moral defence of a socially homogeneous community. Such a view would later play a crucial role in the 2018 election of Bolsonaro, whose main slogan – “Brazil Above Everything, God Above Everyone” – not only evoked Trump’s “Make America Great Again” but also literally, if not admittedly, Hitler’s “*Deutschland über alles.*” This political view can, thus, be seen to respond to social disintegration in an aggressively *defensive* manner: it takes affective togetherness to be possible only by way of an exclusion, or even elimination, of extraneous and corrupting elements, be they ‘communists’ or ‘cultural Marxists’ (associated with the Workers’ Party and the left), ‘scroungers’ or ‘criminals’ (associated with the racialized poor), ‘enemies of the family’ or ‘paedophilia advocates’ (associated with feminist and LGBTQI+ movements), or other deviant figures from the perspective of moral conservatism.

Yet the new far right has not only reacted to the perception of affective fragmentation by advancing a moral crusade against sexual minorities, political opponents, and sectors of the ‘dangerous classes’ in the hopes of achieving a rather homogeneous form of social cohesion; it has also responded in a particular way to the growing sense of normative delegitimization which achieved its peak during the Temer administration. In the context of failed attempts to mitigate a deepening economic crisis (via the radicalization of market-friendly policies) and the emergence of ever-new corruption scandals (resulting from the Operation Car Wash), what came

to be felt as problematic about social institutions is not so much that they appear to embody seemingly inexorable ‘laws of nature’ – as was the case in the depressive order – but rather that we apparently live in a world in which ‘natural’ norms have lost their efficacy. In this regard, the authoritarian subject reacts less to a state of fatalism than to a situation of *anomie*, i.e. a sense that forms of regulation which would be able to provide social relations with order and stability no longer hold. This explains why such a political view is not oriented towards the suspension of prevailing norms, as in the collective effervescence of June 2013, but rather towards the establishment of a repressive order. In reaction to a society perceived as socially disintegrated and anomically de-regulated, the authoritarian claims for a political community that could extirpate disintegrating elements and enforce norms coercive or violent enough to retain their effectiveness.

In addition to authoritarian, the new Brazilian far right is also – and quite strikingly, in view of the features of the depressive order it responds to – characterized by claims for an even further radicalization of the neoliberal project. Bolsonaro’s presidential campaign was, indeed, explicitly marked by an alliance between the defence of moral conservatism and the repressive enforcement of norms, on the one hand, and a radically neoliberal economic programme, on the other (Puzone and Miguel 2019). Such an alliance is certainly pervaded by tensions, yet not necessarily incongruent – both with regard to its historical emergence and its political form. Inasmuch as the roots of the crisis came to be largely associated with Workers’ Party administrations, the way was paved for an identification of the problems of the depressive order with the left and everything connected to it.

In this context, it became reasonable for many to envision a way out of the crisis in the implementation of a programme of economic reforms which would reinforce, rather than contest, the notion that one must abide by the ‘laws of the market’ as well as attempt to become a successful ‘entrepreneur of the self’. Specific to such a radicalized affirmation of neoliberalism, in contrast to other previous instantiations, is precisely its combination with an explicitly authoritarian stance that draws its impetus from the crisis of the depressive order. New authoritarianism and radical neoliberalism are mixed here in a peculiar – we may say: post-depressive – manner. Their political alliance leads, on the one hand, to the notion that an affective communion could be established that would be based on the exclusion or elimination of every

heterogeneous element, i.e., each and every one who refuses or fails to comply with the ideal of an allegedly incorrupt entrepreneur of the self: ‘the good citizen’ (an expression that became widespread in Brazil as the new right-wing rose to prominence). It also leads, on the other, to the idea that a sufficiently cohesive normative order could be achieved only by means of the undeterred enforcement of the ‘laws of the market’: there *shall not* be an alternative.

Concluding Remarks

Such a political project is, as are the previous ones addressed in this essay, pervaded by tensions. It is not only potentially explosive concerning its effects to social relations in general, and in particular to those groups that appear as its opponents; it is also internally conflicted by the very combination of new authoritarianism and radical neoliberalism – and these have been, indeed, widely recognized at this point as two different poles of Bolsonaro’s government as well as two distinctive social movements on which it relies. And yet, the far right feeds off that very instability: the production of an ever-renewed sense of social disintegration and normative disarray allows it to restate, over and over again, its promise that an integrated and regulated social order can only be achieved through the exclusion of extraneous or corrupting elements and the repressive enforcement of naturalized, market-friendly and market-like norms.

Now the Covid-19 pandemic has posed an unexpected challenge to this political regime. The spread of a virus that threatens us all, and whose workings are still largely unknown, puts authoritarian neoliberalism in check in at least two respects. On the one hand, the pandemic has led to the sudden interruption of large sectors of the economy and required direct state intervention in the fields of public health and social assistance. This situation posed new difficulties for the maintenance of a radical programme of neoliberal reforms such as the one carried out thus far by the government. Moreover, the existential threat posed by the pandemic can only with great difficulty be addressed in terms of a war against an external enemy that must be suppressed or eliminated. Anyone can be contaminated and die: the virus does not choose its victims according to moral or ideological criteria. The pandemic challenges thereby the project of establishing a homogeneous national community by purging every alien and corrupt element.

However, in both cases the authoritarian-neoliberal programme has responded by doubling its bets. Although economic and health-care measures have been adopted, these have been largely promoted in spite of the federal government. Bolsonaro's reaction took the exact opposite direction. By minimizing the reality of Covid-19 (a "little flu" easily curable with the use of hydroxychloroquine), he stimulated the continuation of economic activities at all costs: there shall not, by any means, be an alternative. If the consequence of this decision was the contamination of ever larger portions of the population, the government's response has been to try to assign responsibility to other political actors: the state governors, the National Congress, the Federal Supreme Court, or even the Chinese Communist Party. Assuming any responsibility would mean giving some respect to difference, plurality, dissidence. For Bolsonarism, however, the other can only appear as an enemy to be won over. Either the virus poses no threat to the homogeneous community of 'good citizens' and its omnipotent leader, or, if such a threat exists, it is the fault of others.

Whether these tensions will be conducive to the stabilization of a novel social order in line with that far-right project, or rather lead to a different outcome is, at this point, an open question. It would be certainly misleading to consider such a project the only political horizon of a post-depressive situation as it has emerged in Brazil since the Journeys of June. Still, whatever path we might take in this regard cannot but come from the unfolding tensions and struggles posed by such a constellation.

Notes

1] From the documentary "Junho: O Mês que Abalou o Brasil", directed by João Wainer, 2013.

2] From the documentary "Junho: O Mês que Abalou o Brasil", directed by João Wainer, 2013.

References

- Alonso, Angela, Ann Mische. 2016. "Changing Repertoires and Partisan Ambivalence in the New Brazilian Protests." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 36 (2): 144-159.
- Boltanski, Luc, Ève Chiapello. 2017 [1998]. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Braga, Ruy. 2012. *A política do precariado: do populismo à hegemonia lulista*. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- Braga, Ruy. 2017. *A rebeldia do precariado: trabalho e neoliberalismo no Sul global*. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- Bringel, Breno, Geoffrey Pleyers. 2015. "Junho de 2013... dois anos depois. Polarização, impactos e reconfiguração do ativismo no Brasil." *Nueva Sociedad* 2: 4-17.
- Bröckling, Ulrich. 2016 [2007]. *The Entrepreneurial Self*. London: Sage.

- Bueno, Arthur. 2020. "Economic Pathologies of Life," in *International Handbook of Simmel Studies*, edited by Gregor Fitzi, 336-349. London, Routledge.
- Caldeira, Teresa Pires do Rio. 2014. "Qual a novidade dos rolezinhos? Espaço público, desigualdade e mudança em São Paulo." *Novos Estudos Cebrap* 98: 13-20.
- Carvalho, Laura. 2018. *Valsa brasileira: do boom ao caos econômico*. São Paulo: Todavia.
- Chaloub, Jorge, Fernando Perlatto. 2016. "A nova direita brasileira: ideias, retórica e prática política." *Insight Inteligência* 72: 24-41.
- Côrtes, Mariana. 2018. "O dispositivo pentecostal e a agência dos governados." *Em Debate* 10 (1): 31-38.
- Cruz, Sebastião, André Kaysel, and Gustavo Codas (eds.). 2015. *Direita, volver! O retorno da direita e o ciclo político brasileiro*. São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo.
- Dardot, Pierre, Christian Laval. 2014 [2010]. *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. London: Verso.
- Ehrenberg, Alain. 2003. "La dépression, maladie de l'autonomie? Interview d'Alain Ehrenberg." *Nervure* 16 (3): 35-40.
- Ehrenberg, Alain. 2009 [1998]. *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*. Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press.
- Facchini, Regina, Julian Rodrigues. 2017. "Que onda é essa? 'Guerras culturais' e movimento LGBT no cenário brasileiro contemporâneo," in *A diversidade e a livre expressão sexual entre as ruas, as redes e as políticas públicas*, edited by Frederico Viana Machado, Fabiano Barnart, Renan de Mattos, 35-60. Porto Alegre: Rede Unida/Nuances.
- Honneth, Axel. 2000. "Pathologien der individuellen Freiheit. Hegels Zeitdiagnose und die Gegenwart," in *Darstellung: Korrespondenz*, edited by Hans Belting and Jörg Huber. Vienna/New York: Springer.
- Honneth, Axel. 2004 [2002]. "Organized Self-realization: Some Paradoxes of Contemporary Individualization." *European Journal of Social Theory* 7 (4): 463-478.
- Honneth, Axel. 2009 [2004]. "A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory," in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jaeggi, Rahel. 2016. "Nachwort zu Taschenbuchausgabe," in *Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems*. 2. Auflage. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Maricato et al. 2013. *Cidades rebeldes: passe livre e manifestações que tomaram as ruas do Brasil*. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- Medeiros, Jonas, Adriano Januário, Rúrion Melo (eds.). 2019. *Ocupar e resistir: movimentos de ocupação de escolas pelo Brasil (2015-2016)*. São Paulo: Editora 34.
- Medeiros, Jonas, Fabiola Fantí. 2019. "Recent Changes in the Brazilian Feminist Movement: The Emergence of New Collective Subjects," in *Socio-Political Dynamics within the Crisis of the Left Turn: Argentina and Brazil*, edited by Juan Pablo Ferrero, Ana Natalucci, and Luciana Tatagiba, 221-241. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mendonça, Ricardo Fabrino. 2018. "Dimensões democráticas nas Jornadas de Junho: reflexões sobre a compreensão de democracia entre manifestantes de 2013." *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 33 (98).
- Messenberg, Débora. 2017. "A direita que saiu do armário: a cosmovisão dos formadores de opinião dos manifestantes de direita brasileiros." *Sociedade e Estado* 32 (3): 621-647.
- Moraes, Alana, Bernardo Gutiérrez, Henrique Parra, Hugo Albuquerque, Jean Tible, Salvador Schavelzon. 2014. "Junho está sendo," in *Junho: potência das ruas e das redes*, 10-21. São Paulo: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Neri, Marcelo. 2011. *A nova classe média: o lado brilhante da base da pirâmide*. São Paulo: Saraiva.
- Nobre, Marcos. 2013a. *Imobilismo em movimento: da redemocratização ao governo Dilma*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- Nobre, Marcos. 2013b. *Choque de democracia: razões da revolta*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.

- Pelbart, Peter Pál. 2013. "Anota aí: eu sou ninguém." *Folha de São Paulo*, 19 July. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/opiniaio/119566-quotanota-ai-eu-sou-ninguemquot.shtml>. Accessed 5 Dec 2019.
- Pierucci, Antônio Flávio. 1987. "As bases da nova direita." *Novos Estudos Cebrap* 19: 26-45.
- Pierucci, Antônio Flávio. 1989. "A direita mora do outro lado da cidade." *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, 4 (10): 46-64.
- Pinheiro-Machado, Rosana, Lucia Mury Scalco. 2014. "Rolezinhos: marcas, consumo e segregação no Brasil." *Revista Estudos Culturais* 1 (1).
- Pochmann, Marcio. 2012. *Nova classe média? O trabalho na base da pirâmide social*. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- Puzone, Vladimir, Luis Felipe Miguel. 2019. "A Brief Afterword: Brazilian Left Faces the Rise of Neofascism," in *The Brazilian Left in the 21st Century: Conflict and Conciliation in Peripheral Capitalism*, 285-296. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reckwitz, Andreas. 2017. *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten: Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Rocha, Camila. 2019a. "Menos Marx, mais Mises": uma gênese da nova direita brasileira (2006-2018). PhD Dissertation in Political Science. University of São Paulo.
- Rocha, Camila. 2019b. "'Imposto é roubo'. A formação de um contrapúblico ultraliberal e os protestos pró-impeachment de Dilma Rousseff." *Dados* 62 (3).
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2013 [2005]. *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2011. "Beschleunigung und Depression. Überlegungen zum Zeitverhältnis der Moderne." *Psyche* 65: 1041-1060.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2019 [2016]. *Resonance: A Sociology of the Relationship to the World*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2017. "Dynamic Stabilization, the Triple A Approach to the Good Life, and the Resonance Conception". *Questions de communication* 31: 437-456.
- Sennett, Richard. 1998. *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. London/New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Singer, André. 2012. *Os sentidos do lulismo: reforma gradual e pacto conservador*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- Singer, André. 2018. *O lulismo em crise: um quebra-cabeça do período Dilma (2011-2016)*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- Solano, Esther, Pablo Ortellado, Márcio Moretto. 2017. "2016, o ano da polarização?" *Análise* 22: 5-20.
- Solano, Esther (ed.). 2018. *O ódio como política: a reinvenção das direitas no Brasil*. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- Souza, Jessé. 2016. *A radiografia do golpe: entenda como e por que você foi enganado*. Rio de Janeiro: Leya.
- Telles, Helcimara. 2015. "O que os protestos trazem de novo para a política brasileira?" *Em Debate* 7 (2): 7-14.

Biography

Arthur Bueno is Lecturer and Research Fellow at the Philosophy Department of the University of Frankfurt, Visiting Professor at the University of São Paulo, and President of the Georg Simmel Gesellschaft. He is also member of the research centres Normative Orders (Frankfurt) and Law & Democracy (CEBRAP, São Paulo). He was an Alexander von Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellow at the Max Weber Centre, University of Erfurt, and at the University Paris Nanterre. His research interests include critical theory, social philosophy, forms of subjectivity, and social suffering.